

# Electricity and gas disconnections in France

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## Perspective on disconnections in the policy debate

The debate about electricity disconnections in France dates back to the pre-liberalization period. In the early 2000s the disconnection practices of suppliers led to the mobilization of employees of the two main energy suppliers<sup>1</sup> EDF (Electricité de France) and GDF (Gaz de France), who refused to apply disconnection rules (see Bérout [2005] on the “Robin Hoods of energy”) and to the emergence of initiatives like the association Droit à l’Energie Stop aux Coupures which was created in 2006 (Lees, 2014). Over time, disconnections were increasingly considered as an important public issue. In 2007, an initiative dealing with energy poverty, the [RAPPEL network](#) (network of French energy poverty actors) was created. The same year, the national energy ombudsman ([Médiateur national de l’énergie](#)) started operation. In the French parliament, the topic of disconnections was particularly debated between 2010 and 2012, at a time when energy poverty started being officially defined in France.

Formally, the liberalization of energy markets was followed in 2008 by the adoption of a decree (Décret n° 2008-780<sup>2</sup>) specifying the rules that a supplier has to follow in case of non-payment of electricity, gas, heat and water bills. It specifies under which conditions a consumer can be disconnected or the power supply can be

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<sup>1</sup> At the beginning of the decade 2000, EDF and GDF were the state-held French electricity and gas monopolies.

<sup>2</sup> *Décret n° 2008-780 du 13 août 2008 relatif à la procédure applicable en cas d'impayés des factures d'électricité, de gaz, de chaleur et d'eau*, <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/JORFTEXT000019325694/2020-11-14/>

reduced in case of non-payment. This decree has been modified several times since.

In its current version, the decree n° 2008-780 specifies that for those consumers who have benefitted from any energy assistance measure dedicated to low-income households, specific procedures apply. These measures include the "[chèque énergie](#)", which is an energy allowance for low-income households, and the social fund for housing (FSL – *Fonds de Solidarité Logement*), which provides assistance to households with energy payment difficulties<sup>3</sup>. For households benefitting from these measures, the delay before a disconnection is longer than for other customers and the supplier generally informs the social services of the local authorities about the non-payment of the bill to allow these offices to review households' energy debts, to help households with application to the FSL and to negotiate payment delays with the supplier. According to the decree n° 2008-780, disconnections for non-payment are suspended when a household has asked the FSL for financial assistance for the payment of energy bills.

Since the winter 2013-2014, the decree also includes a ban on disconnections for all households during the winter period, which is currently between November 1<sup>st</sup> and March 31<sup>st</sup> of each year. Moreover, for beneficiaries of the "*chèque énergie*", the power cannot be reduced during that period. Finally, the decree obliges the energy suppliers to inform the energy regulator CRE (*Commission de Régulation de l'Énergie*) and the national energy ombudsman (*Médiateur National de l'Énergie*) about the number of supply interruptions and power reductions<sup>4</sup> for each quarter. In practice, the ban on disconnections during the winter period is often followed by disconnections in spring.

For 2019, the national energy ombudsman noted a significant increase of the number of supplier interventions for non-payment of bills, which include disconnections or power reductions<sup>5</sup>: 279 950 consumers have been disconnected from electricity supply (+13%), 273 437 consumers had their power supply reduced (+19%) and 118 159 consumers have been disconnected from gas supply (+24%).

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<sup>3</sup> More generally, the FSL can provide assistance to low-income households who face payment difficulties of rents and utility bills.

<sup>4</sup> Power reductions are a method used to limit the electricity consumption of households with arrears on electricity bills. These reductions can be implemented as a preliminary step before a power disconnection. Power reductions aim at preventing the impact on households of a disconnection, as they can still consume electricity for basic uses. Depending on the power supply in a consumer's contract the power supply can be reduced to 3kVA or 2kVA.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.energie-mediateur.fr/energie-les-interventions-pour-impayes-repartent-a-la-hausse/>

In 2020, to prevent an increase in disconnections in spring resulting from the COVID-19 crisis, the ban on disconnections of energy consumers with payment difficulties was extended until 10<sup>th</sup> July 2020<sup>6</sup>. Following the second COVID lockdown, which started in the last days of October 2020, the main electricity supplier EDF announced their decision to extend the ban on power reductions and disconnections of electricity and gas until 15<sup>th</sup> January 2021 and to suspend penalties for late payment of bills.

## Research perspective on disconnections

The literature analysing disconnections in France can mostly be found in the fields of sociology and anthropology. In her thesis, Lees (2014) analyses electricity disconnections both from the point of view of the employees of EDF and of the energy poor households. She shows how the rejection of disconnections has become a symbol of the mobilization against the privatization of national energy suppliers and for the defence of the public service of energy supply. One objective of this mobilization was to encourage the civil society to participate in the public debate on the transformations of the French energy sector. The perspective and experience of energy poor households in Marseilles is also presented. Lees (2014) shows that disconnections are perceived as small breaches in the everyday lives of people who already face multiple difficulties. Disconnections thus have an impact on how people live in their home which lasts not only for the duration of the power cut but continues to have an impact beyond the power cut. It also causes emotions like anger and shame of people who thus feel that they are not like others.

Dominique Le Roux (2014) discusses how the question of disconnections became central in the public discourse on energy poverty, not only for EDF's trade unions in the debates on the liberalization of the energy sector, but more generally for the energy suppliers in their relations with local authorities and associations to fight social exclusion.

Finally, elements can be found in the literature on the symbolic roles of disconnections. Cacciari (2017), in his paper on the role of mediating associations, shows the role of the associations' workers in the construction of the image of energy poor households, who can be considered either as consumers facing transitory difficulties or instead as people who need assistance. Lairaudat (2017)

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<sup>6</sup> Ordonnance n° 2020-331 du 25 mars 2020 relative au prolongement de la trêve hivernale (<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000041756148/>) and Loi n° 2020-546 du 11 mai 2020 prorogeant l'état d'urgence sanitaire et complétant ses dispositions (<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000041865244/>)

discusses the symbolic role of electricity disconnections for the reputational risk of the energy supplier EDF and the role of intermediaries in the management of relations with customers facing payment difficulties.

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Website of the French Energy Ombudsman (Médiateur National de l'Energie): <https://www.energie-mediateur.fr/>