

Too Close to Paris, Yet Too Far From Care: Saint-Denis and the 93's Healthcare Crisis

Idil Yilmaz & Edie Twells-Eastwood | Paris | 27/11/25

“We are not treated the same way as other departments in France.”

That's how Senator Adèle Ziane sums up what many residents of Seine-Saint-Denis have been feeling for years. Despite being located just half an hour outside of the French capital, the department, and particularly the city of Saint-Denis, are facing a severe and persistent lack of access to healthcare.

While Paris continues to see a steady presence of medical professionals, entire neighborhoods in Seine-Saint-Denis struggle to find a general practitioner. According to official figures, nearly all inhabitants of the department are now considered to live in a “*zone sous-dotée*”, an underserved medical area.

As France approaches the 2026 municipal elections held across the country, access to healthcare in Saint-Denis is no longer just a public health concern, it is fast-becoming the main issue that will shape local campaigns, influence voters, and redefine the priorities of future mayors.

Unequal Distribution of Doctors

In Seine-Saint-Denis, 97.8% of residents [live](#) in a *priority intervention zone*, the category used for the most under-served areas for primary care.

What's more, according to a [2023 parliamentary report](#), 25 % of inhabitants of Seine-Saint-Denis do not even have a general practitioner, and hospital and medico-social equipment is far below the national average (37 hospitalisation beds per 100k vs the average of 80 in France).

For residents, this means: long waiting times, difficulty finding a general practitioner, and, in worst cases, giving up on care entirely.

Compared with central Paris, the numbers show a striking imbalance.

To understand the situation better, we looked at data from metropolitan France, Île-de-France, Paris, and Seine-Saint-Denis. According to 2025 INSEE data, Paris has 942 specialists and general practitioners per 100.000 inhabitants, while that number decreases significantly to 236 in Seine-Saint-Denis (figure 1).

Density of specialist and general practitioners per 100.000 inhabitants

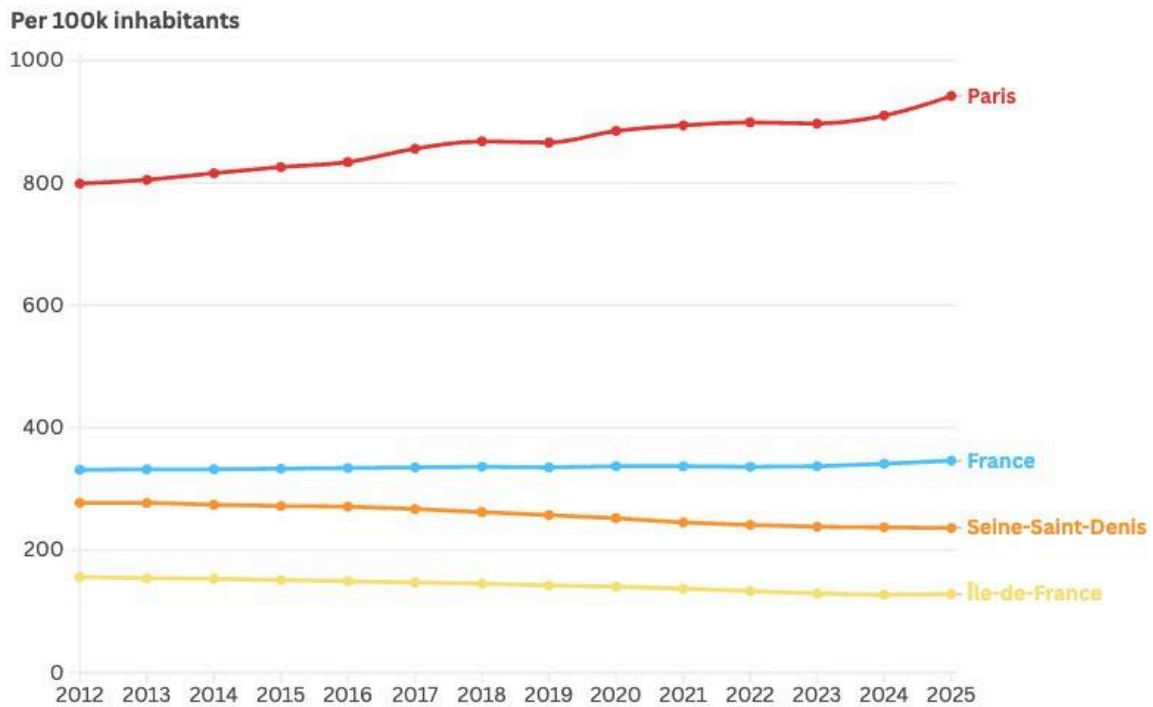


Figure 1: Density of specialists and general practitioners per 100.000 inhabitants, INSEE 2025 - [Paris](#), [Seine-Saint-Denis](#), [Île-de-France](#), [France](#). (Data)

While Paris shows a steady increase in the number of doctors over time, Seine-Saint-Denis remains far behind, well below both the regional and national averages. This gap illustrates a structural inequality, not a temporary shortage.

According to Senator Adèle Ziane, this situation is no coincidence. He argues the department is “not treated the same way as others” when it comes to investment in healthcare and other public services such as education and policing.

A Densely Populated Territory with Not Enough Doctors

Katy Bontinck, First Deputy Mayor at the Municipality of Saint-Denis, on the other hand, disputes the label of a “medical desert”

“Saint-Denis is not a medical desert at all,” she insists, citing the French government’s own definition from its recent plan on *Maisons France Santé*.

According to the plan, announced by Prime Minister Sébastien Lecornu, a medical desert means lacking access to a healthcare professional within 30 minutes of home.

“We have hospitals and primary care structures in every neighborhood of the city,” notes Bontinck. The distinction, she explains, is crucial. “We don’t have a medical desert. We have a medical *density* problem.”

As Bontinck argues, Seine-Denis or Seine-Saint-Denis as a whole is a highly populated department. According to the latest INSEE data, Seine-Saint-Denis has no rural population, meaning it is fully urbanised, just like Paris (Figure 2).

Share of population living in rural areas

0,1 89,8
1,000,000 2,000,000

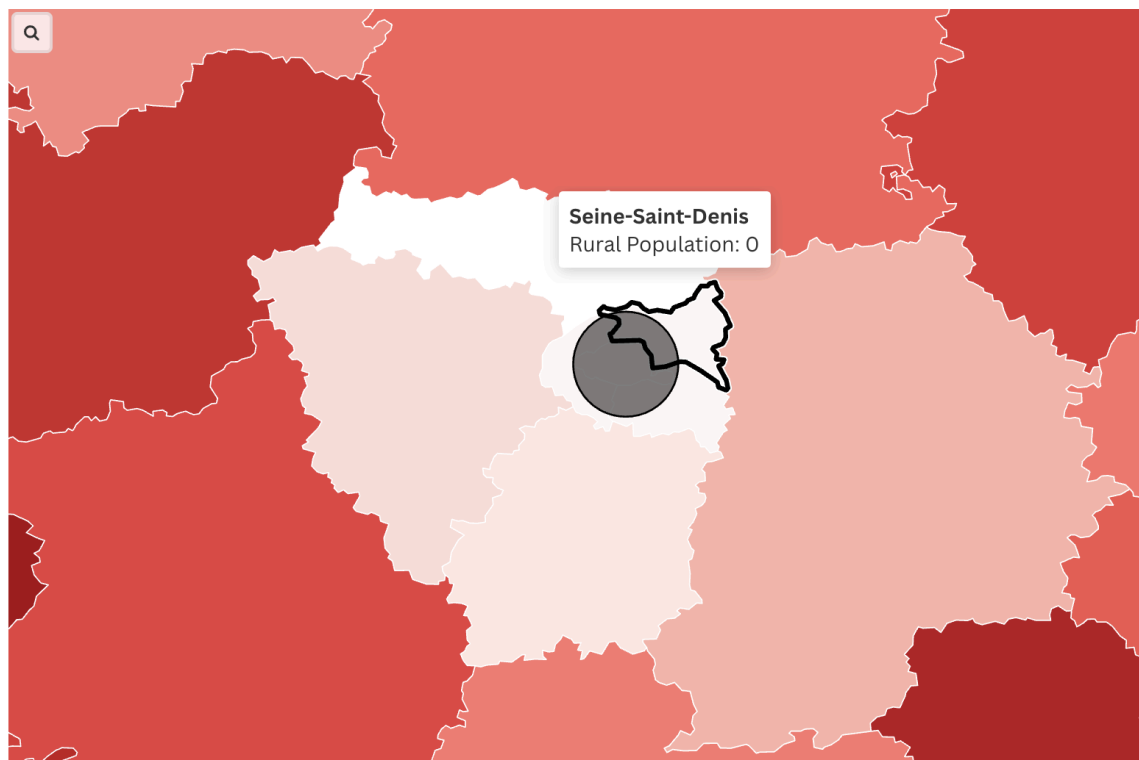


Figure 2: Map of Île-de-France, *Share of population living in rural areas*, [INSEE 2025](#). (Data)

Medical deserts are often associated with isolated, rural areas. However, despite its extreme urban density and proximity to Paris, access to medical care in Seine-Saint-Denis remains critically low. Within the Île-de-France region, it stands out for having both a high population and a young demographic structure, which in theory should require *more* medical services, not fewer.

“The notion of medical desert used by the government is not at all appropriate for Saint-Denis,” Bontinck argues. It’s not about access; it’s about capacity. There aren’t enough doctors for the population size and the specific health needs of Saint-Denis residents.

Bontinck underlines that the city has been working to tackle the problem: 14 million euros per year in healthcare services and employing around 70 salaried doctors in its five municipal health centers. Since 2024, 18 new professionals, including a paediatrician and a neurologist, have joined these centers.

Isolation in the Shadow of Paris

Beyond the question of how many doctors are available, another central factor affects access to care in Saint-Denis: transportation (figure 3).

Main modes of transportation in Paris and Seine-Saint-Denis

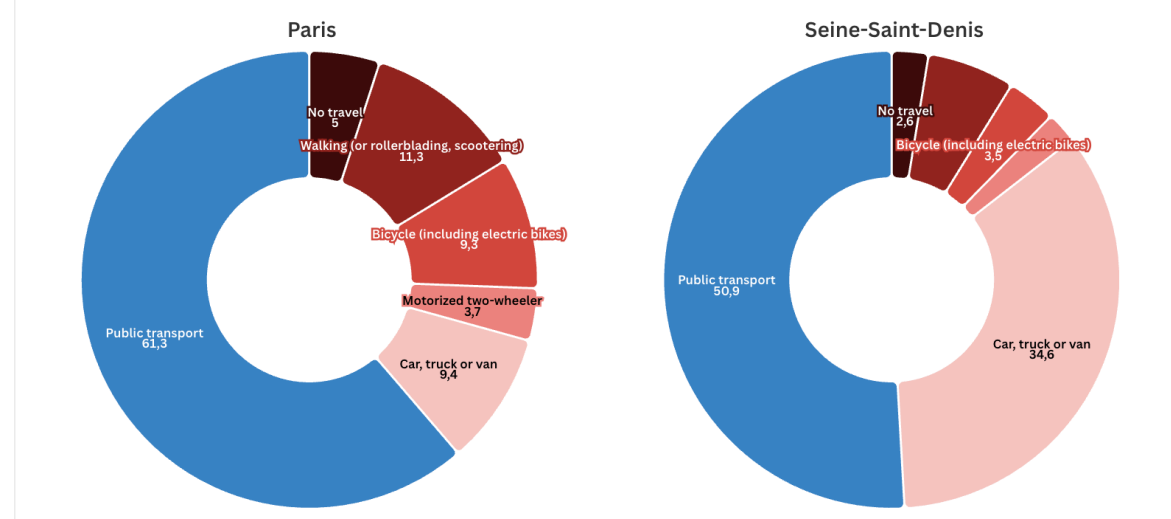


Figure 3: Main modes of transportation in Paris and Seine-Saint-Denis, INSEE 2021 - [Paris](#), [Seine-Saint-Denis](#). ([Data](#))

In Paris, more than 61% of residents rely on public transport as their main mode of travel, reflecting the capital's dense and highly interconnected metro and bus networks. In contrast, residents of Seine-Saint-Denis are far more dependent on private vehicles. More than one third of the population (34.6%) relies on a car, truck, or van, nearly four times the proportion in Paris. While a slim majority (50.9%) still uses public transport, the difference reveals a clear structural inequality in mobility.

Compared to Paris, where residents largely rely on an extensive and interconnected metro system, inhabitants of Seine-Saint-Denis are more dependent on personal vehicles and longer commutes. Certain neighborhoods remain poorly connected to major transport lines, making it more difficult not only for patients to reach hospitals and clinics, but also for doctors to consider settling in the area.

Senator Ziane says transportation is one of the main reasons behind the lack of attractiveness of the department.

“You really need your car. It is very different from Paris,” he explains, adding that many areas of Saint-Denis and its surroundings remain “very far from the subway and public transport.”

According to him, however, recent developments such as the extension of Metro Line 14 and the construction of the future *Grand Paris Express* network may gradually reverse this situation by creating new opportunities for professionals, including doctors, to settle in the department.

2026 Municipal Elections

As the March 2026 municipal elections loom, the question of healthcare access in Saint-Denis reveals a clear tension between differing political perspectives.

On one hand, the city government insists that the situation is improving thanks to local investments, recruitment efforts and the opening of new positions within municipal health centers. On the other hand, national and departmental representatives continue to denounce a long history of institutional neglect.

This disagreement highlights a wider debate about who should be responsible for ensuring equal access to healthcare: the State, the region, the department, or the city? And more importantly, who will voters trust to finally resolve this crisis?

Territory at a Crossroads

Situated just kilometers from the French capital, Saint-Denis remains separated from Paris not by distance, but by inequality. In a department marked by demographic pressure, economic vulnerability and historical marginalisation, access to healthcare has become both a daily struggle and an emerging political symbol.

While authorities debate definitions and statistics, residents continue to search for doctors, to wait for appointments, and to travel long distances for care. In 2026, when citizens of Saint-Denis head to the polls to elect their next mayor, they may not only be voting for a candidate but for a vision of who deserves access to care in the heart of the capital’s shadow.