

New Caledonia



Background	The first humans settled in New Caledonia around 1600 B.C. The Lapita were skilled navigators, and evidence of their pottery around the Pacific has served as a guide for understanding human expansion in the region. Successive waves of migrants from other islands in Melanesia intermarried with the Lapita, giving rise to the Kanak ethnic group considered indigenous to New Caledonia. British explorer James COOK was the first European to visit New Caledonia in 1774, giving it the Latin name for Scotland. Missionaries first landed in New Caledonia in 1840. In 1853, France annexed New Caledonia to preclude any British attempt to claim the island. France declared it a penal colony in 1864 and sent more than 20,000 prisoners to New Caledonia in the ensuing three decades.
	Nickel was discovered in 1864, and French prisoners were directed to mine it. France brought in indentured servants and enslaved labor from elsewhere in Southeast Asia to work the mines, blocking Kanaks from accessing the most profitable part of the local economy. In 1878, High Chief ATAI led a rebellion against French rule. The Kanaks were relegated to reservations, leading to periodic smaller uprisings and culminating in a large revolt in 1917 that colonial authorities brutally suppressed. During World War II, New Caledonia became an important base for Allied troops, and the US moved its South Pacific headquarters to the island in 1942. Following the war, France made New Caledonia an overseas territory and granted French citizenship to all inhabitants in 1953, thereby permitting the Kanaks to move off the reservations.
	The Kanak nationalist movement began in the 1950s, but most voters chose to remain a territory in an independence referendum in 1958. The European population of New Caledonia boomed in the 1970s with a renewed focus on nickel mining, reigniting Kanak nationalism. Key Kanak leaders were assassinated in the early 1980s, leading to escalating violence and dozens of fatalities. The Matignon Accords of 1988 provided for a 10-year transition period. The Noumea Accord of 1998 transferred increasing governing responsibility from France to New Caledonia over a 20-year period and provided for three independence referenda. In the first held in 2018, voters rejected independence by 57% to 43%; in the second held in 2020, voters rejected independence 53% to 47%. In the third referendum held in 2021, voters rejected independence 96% to 4%; however, a boycott by key Kanak groups spurred challenges about the legitimacy of the vote. Pro-independence parties subsequently won a majority in the New Caledonian Government for the first time. France and New Caledonia officials remain in talks about the status of the territory.
Capital	name: Noumea
Government type	parliamentary democracy (Territorial Congress); an overseas collectivity of France
Area	total : 18,575 sq km land: 18,275 sq km water: 300 sq km
Climate	tropical; modified by southeast trade winds; hot, humid
Natural resources	nickel, chrome, iron, cobalt, manganese, silver, gold, lead, copper
Population	total: 304,167 (2024 est.)
Population growth rate	1.11% (2025 est.)
Ethnic groups	Kanak 39.1%, European 27.1%, Wallisian, Futunian 8.2%, Tahitian 2.1%, Indonesian 1.4%, Ni-Vanuatu 1%, Vietnamese 0.9%, other 17.7%, unspecified 2.5% (2014 est.)
Religions	Christian 85.2%, Muslim 2.8%, other 1.6%, unaffiliated 10.4% (2020 est.)
Languages	French (official), 33 Melanesian-Polynesian dialects
Executive branch	chief of state: President Emmanuel MACRON (since 14 May 2017); represented by High Commissioner Jacques BILLANT (since 3 May 2025) head of government: President of the Government Alcide PONGA (since 8 January 2025)
Legislative branch	legislature name: Territorial Congress (Congrès du Territoire)
Diplomatic representation from the US	embassy: none (overseas territory of France)
Economic overview	upper-middle-income French Pacific territorial economy; enormous nickel reserves; ongoing French independence negotiations; large Chinese nickel exporter; luxury eco-tourism destination; large French aid recipient; high cost-of-living; lingering wealth disparities
Real GDP (purchasing power parity)	\$8.469 billion (2024 est.) \$8.642 billion (2023 est.) \$8.678 billion (2022 est.)
Real GDP per capita	\$34,600 (2024 est.) \$35,000 (2023 est.) \$33,500 (2022 est.)
Exports	\$1.92 billion (2021 est.) \$1.8 billion (2020 est.) \$1.79 billion (2019 est.)
Exports - partners	China 75%, Japan 9%, Taiwan 3%, India 3%, France 2% (2023)
Exports - commodities	iron alloys, nickel, nickel ore, processed crustaceans, shellfish (2023)

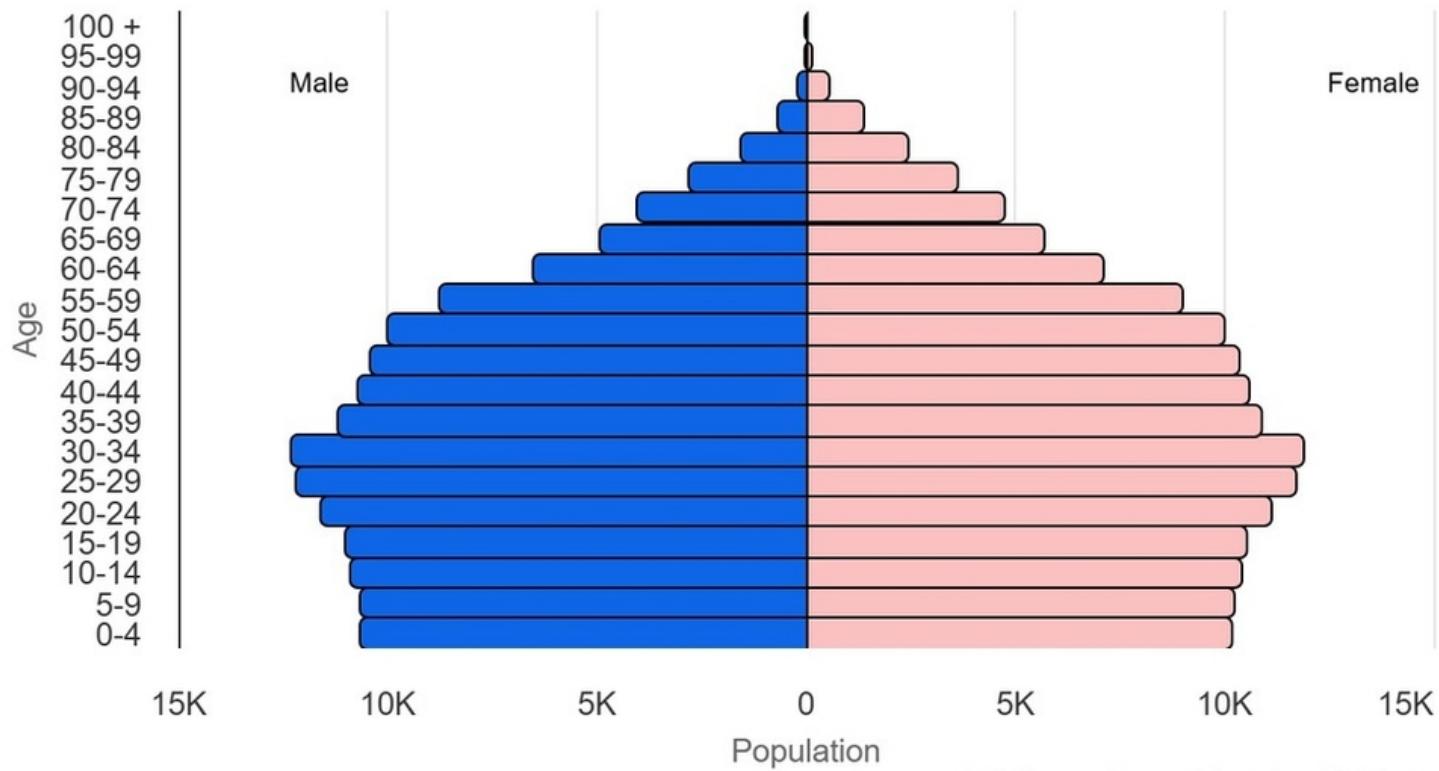
Imports \$2.26 billion (2021 est.)
\$2.1 billion (2020 est.)
\$2.48 billion (2019 est.)

Imports - partners France 36%, Singapore 16%, Australia 15%, China 6%, NZ 3% (2023)

Imports - commodities refined petroleum, coal, cars, aircraft, packaged medicine (2023)

Population Pyramid

New Caledonia (2024)



U.S. Census Bureau, International Database