

Knowledge and Use of Inuktitut Among Inuit in Canada, 1981-2001

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and
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1. Background

This report is the fifth in a series that looks at some of the social, demographic and economic changes experienced by Inuit in Canada over the past 20 years. Based on census information, it provides information on the knowledge and use of Inuktitut among those of Inuit ancestry¹ from 1981 to 2001.

This report is based on research initially carried out by Jeremy Hull (2002) and has been developed by the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami in collaboration with the Strategic Research and Analysis Directorate (SRAD) of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC).

The **Inuit ancestry population** includes those whose ancestors were all Inuit and those who reported having Inuit and non-Inuit ancestors on the census.

Three main language indicators are used in this report: **mother tongue**, **home language** and **knowledge of English or French**.

Mother tongue is the first language learned at home in childhood and still understood.

Home language refers to the language spoken most often or on a regular basis at home.

Knowledge of official languages refers to the ability to conduct a conversation in English only, in French only, or in both English and French.

Source: Statistics Canada, 2002.

¹ There are many ways to define the Inuit population. For this report and for others in this series, the focus is on those with Inuit ancestry. Another way to define the population is through focusing on those whose ancestors were all Inuit (no non-Inuit ancestors). There are important differences between these two populations. For further information, please see the report in this series entitled "Determining the Inuit Population - Definitional Issues and Differences" (INAC, 2006a) The Inuit identity definition is not used, as data for the identity concept were not available from the census until 1996. The counts in this report exclude institutional residents.

Because of the regional linguistic diversity that exists among Inuit across the Canadian North, data for four Inuit regions are provided. Comparisons between Inuit living in the north² and south of Canada are made and differences between younger and older Inuit are examined.

2. Inuktitut - Setting the Context

In 2001, Inuktitut was the mother tongue of nearly 30,000 Inuit in Canada. The language is in fact a continuum of dialects that in Canada extends from the Inuvialuit region in the Northwest Territories to Nunatsiavut, the Inuit region in northern coastal Labrador. As of 1996, it was one of just three Aboriginal languages in the country that had enough speakers to ensure its survival (Norris, 1998). The language remains strong today despite many forces contributing to its erosion. Historically, the residential school system contributed to a loss of language among Inuit (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2002). Today, a limited Inuktitut curriculum in the classroom, an ever-growing southern media presence, and a number of other factors make it more challenging to pass Inuktitut on from one generation to the next.

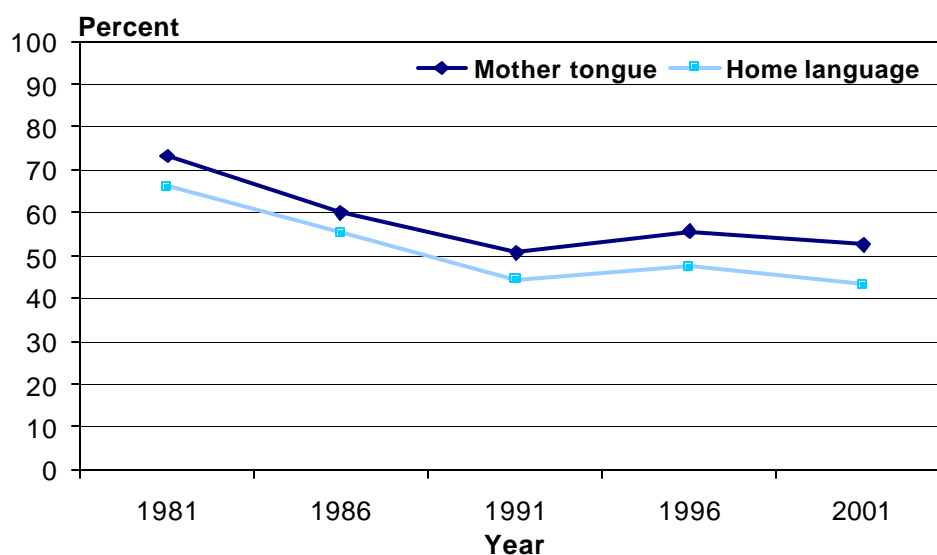
The importance of Inuktitut to Inuit culture cannot be overstated. A report by Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated (2004) states that "language is not only important for social well-being, it is necessary for cultural survival. Language is the very heart of culture. Without language, culture is an empty shell." Inuit cultural values and kinship terms, along with knowledge of the natural environment and Inuit understanding of their place in the world can be best taught and expressed through Inuktitut (Avataq Cultural Institute).

3. Extent of Inuktitut Mother Tongue and Home Language

In Figure 1, it can be seen that the percentage of Inuit reporting Inuktitut as a mother tongue and home language varied from 1981 to 2001. For both indicators, there was a dramatic drop from 1981 to 1991, with figures increasing somewhat from 1991 to 1996 and then declining again from 1996 to 2001. The percentage of Inuit with an Inuktitut mother tongue declined from 73% in 1981 to 53% in 2001. Home language figures followed a similar trend, falling from 66% in 1981 to 43% in 2001.

² For the purposes of this report, "north" includes Nunavut, the Northwest Territories, Northern Québec and Labrador. The area that remains is considered "south." With the exception of Nunavut, the northern regions referred to here are somewhat different from those of the remaining Inuit land claim regions (Nunatsiavut in Labrador, Nunavik in northern Québec and the Inuvialuit region in the Northwest Territories). The geographic units provided here are based on census delineations

Figure 1
Inuit With Inuktitut Mother Tongue and Home Language, Canada, 1981-2001



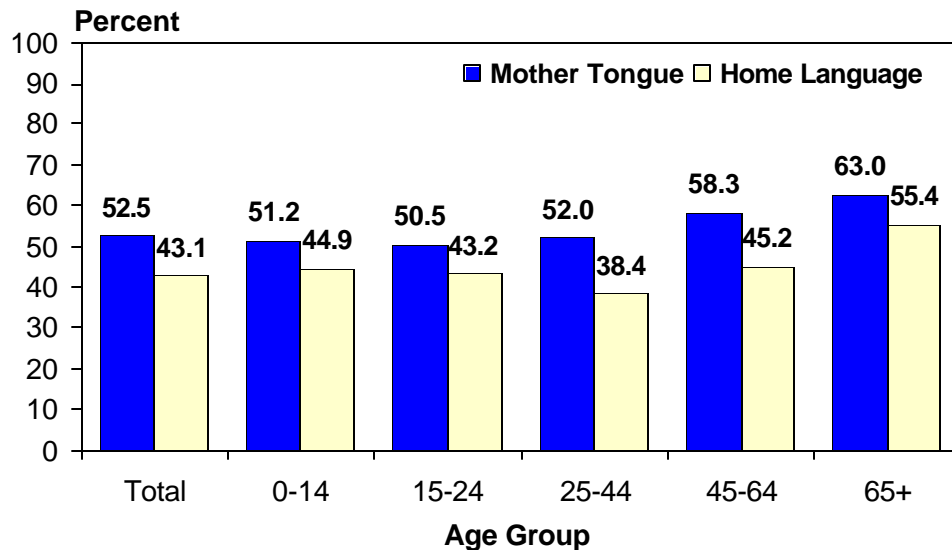
While much of the decrease shown above is due to a decline in the percentage of Inuktitut speakers, some of the change is due to other factors. One would expect the percentage of Inuit with an Inuktitut mother tongue to change slowly as people gradually increased or decreased their use of this language at home. This, in turn, would affect the mother tongue of newly born children. In 1986, many people who had not previously done so reported having multiple Inuit and other origins.³ It might be expected that this group would be less likely to have Inuktitut as their mother tongue or home language. This contributed to a decline in these two indicators.

Similarly, the reported increase in the percentage of those with an Inuktitut mother tongue and home language from 1991 to 1996 also likely reflects changes in how people answered the census question on ancestry.

³ This came about because of a change to the question on one's ancestry. Prior to 1986, the census question did not encourage respondents to identify more than one ancestry. In 1986, the census question did encourage the reporting of multiple ancestries. For more information on the differences in Inuktitut mother tongue and home language between these groups, see the report in this series entitled "Determining the Inuit Population - Definitional Issues and Differences" (INAC, 2006a).

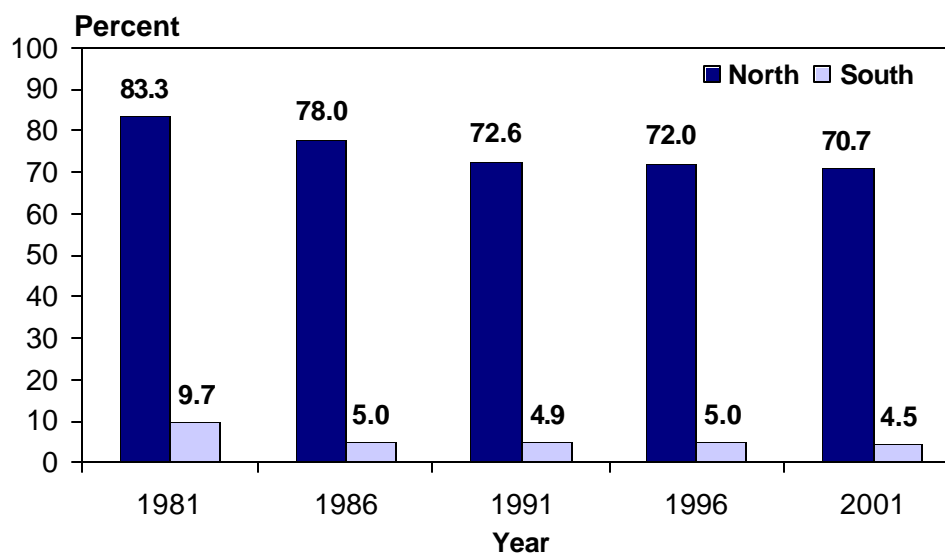
If Inuktitut prevalence was declining over time, it would be expected that those in the oldest age groups would be more likely than the youngest Inuit to report having Inuktitut as their mother tongue and home language. In 2001, Inuit aged 65 and over were indeed the most likely to report Inuktitut as their home language and mother tongue, while those aged 15-24 were the least likely to report an Inuktitut mother tongue (Figure 2). Inuit aged 25-44 were the least likely to speak Inuktitut at home. This could in part be related to the higher level of labour force participation of this group. Participation in a predominantly English or French labour market might cause people to alter their language use at home as well.

Figure 2
Inuit with Inuktitut Mother Tongue and Home Language by Age Group, Canada, 2001



Over the past two decades, the percentage of Inuit speaking Inuktitut as their mother tongue declined in both the north and south of Canada (Figure 3).

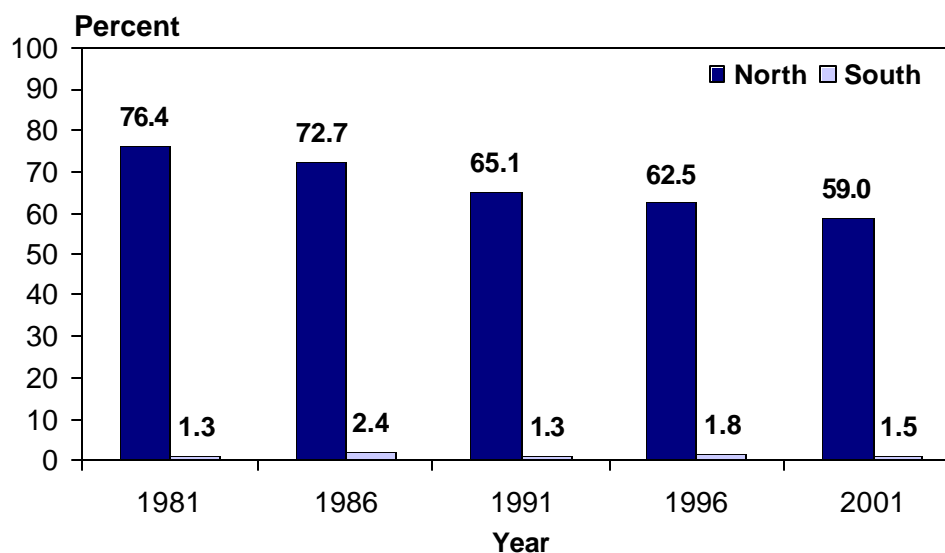
Figure 3
Inuit With an Inuktitut Mother Tongue, Northern and Southern Canada, 1981-2001



In 1981, over 8 out of 10 Inuit in the north reported Inuktitut as their mother tongue. This dipped to just over 7 out of 10 in 2001. The percentage of Inuit living in southern Canada with an Inuktitut mother tongue was much lower than in the north. In 1981, 10% of southern Inuit had an Inuktitut mother tongue, compared with 5% in 2001.

In southern Canada, Inuktitut was hardly used by Inuit as their main language at home (Figure 4). From 1981 to 2001, the percentage with an Inuktitut home language varied between 1% and 2%. A much larger percentage of northern Inuit reported Inuktitut as their home language, although the percentage declined significantly from 1981 to 2001. In 1981, 76% of Inuit in the north reported using Inuktitut as their primary language in the home, compared with 59% in 2001.

Figure 4
Inuit With an Inuktitut Home Language, Northern and Southern Canada, 1981-2001

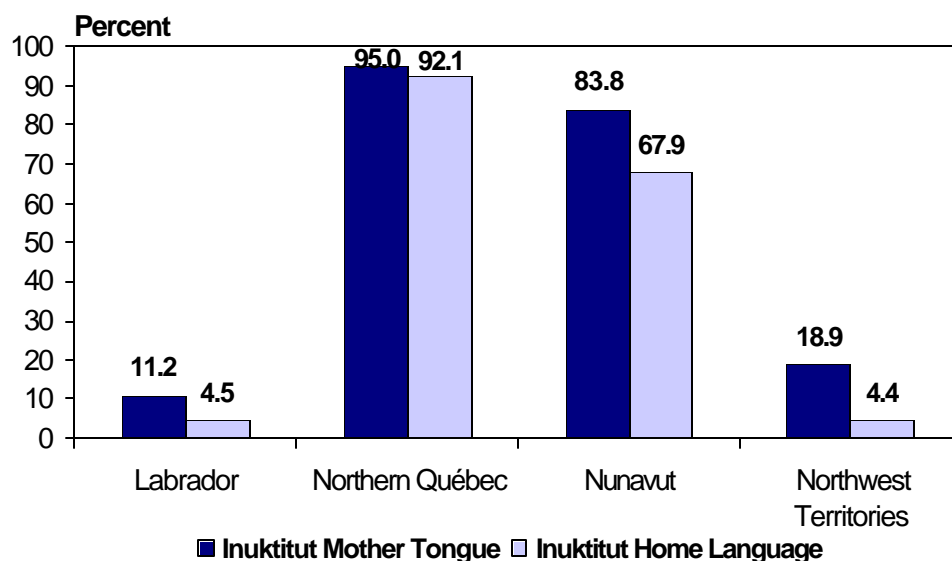


Sometimes, mistakenly, the Canadian North is seen as a homogenous region. However, figures for both Inuktitut mother tongue and home language show that this is not the case. While there are similarities in culture across Inuit regions, historical changes and other factors have had an impact on the extent to which Inuktitut is spoken regionally. As previously mentioned, there are many dialects of Inuktitut spoken across the north. While all of these dialects have undergone erosion over time, some remain strong, while others do not have a solid base and are spoken primarily by elders. These run the risk of dying out (Kirby, 2005).

Figure 5 shows that Inuktitut remains strongest in northern Québec.⁴ Here, 95% had an Inuktitut mother tongue in 2001, and 92% spoke Inuktitut most often at home.

⁴ For more information on Inuktitut in the school system in northern Québec, see the report in this series entitled "Gains Made by Inuit in Formal Education and School Attendance, 1981-2001" (INAC, 2006b).

Figure 5
Inuit With Inuktitut Mother Tongue and Inuktitut Home Language by Region, 2001



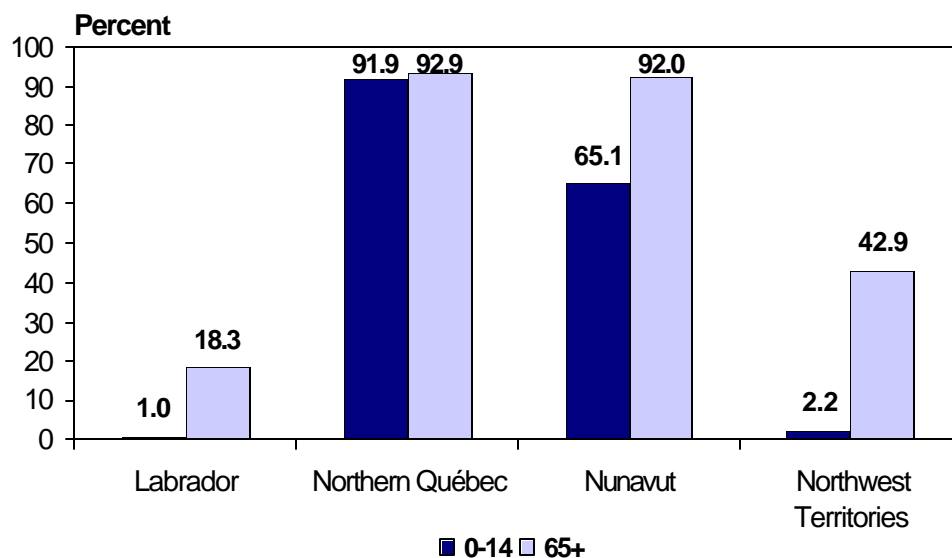
While 84% of Inuit living in Nunavut had Inuktitut as their mother tongue, a smaller percentage - 68% - had an Inuktitut home language. This gap between mother tongue and home language is significant because of its impact on language transmission. Languages remain strong when they are passed on from older generations to younger speakers. The most efficient place for this transmission to take place is in the home where Inuktitut is used on a daily basis and where it is transmitted to children as their mother tongue (Norris, 1998).

In both Labrador and the Northwest Territories, much smaller proportions of Inuit had an Inuktitut mother tongue (11% and 19% respectively) and less than 5% of Inuit in both regions were using Inuktitut extensively in the home.

One factor contributing to a decline in knowledge and use of the Labrador Inuktitut dialect was the introduction of English as the language of instruction in schools after Labrador entered into Confederation in 1949. Inuvialuktun⁵, the dialect of Inuktitut spoken by those in the Inuvialuit region of the Northwest Territories, has been in a state of decline for decades. While many factors stemming from contact with non-Inuit have contributed to the erosion of Inuvialuktun, one main factor was the residential school system, where students were forbidden to speak their language. According to Statistics Canada (2003), over one-quarter of Inuit adults in the Northwest Territories reported having attended a residential school⁶ - the highest proportion among the four Inuit regions.

Dialects of Inuktitut unique to these two regions are threatened, as there were very few younger Inuit with an Inuktitut mother tongue or home language in Labrador and the Northwest Territories (Figure 6). Speakers of these dialects were primarily seniors. In Labrador, 1% of Inuit children under the age of 15 had Inuktitut as their home language. The figure for the Northwest Territories was 2%.

Figure 6
Inuit Aged 0-14 and 65 and Over With Inuktitut Home Language by Region, 2001



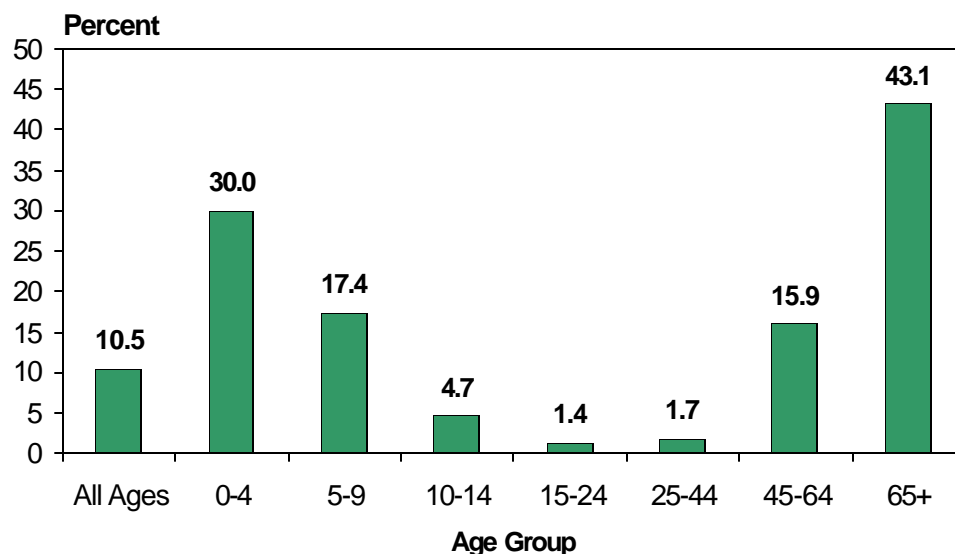
⁵ This dialect is also known as "Inuinnaqtun". It is also spoken in western Nunavut.

⁶ The percentage is based on those that reported having attended school. Those without any formal schooling are excluded from the calculation.

4. Knowledge of English or French

This section focuses on Inuit who cannot carry on a conversation in one of Canada's official languages - English or French. In many cases, an ability to converse in either of these two languages can help improve job prospects and increases the likelihood of obtaining a well-paying, stable job. Similarly, it can make it easier to access some services that may be available only in English or French. Figure 7 shows that those who were the least likely to be able to converse in English or French were the youngest and oldest Inuit.

Figure 7
Inuit Not Able to Converse in English or French by Age Group, Canada, 2001

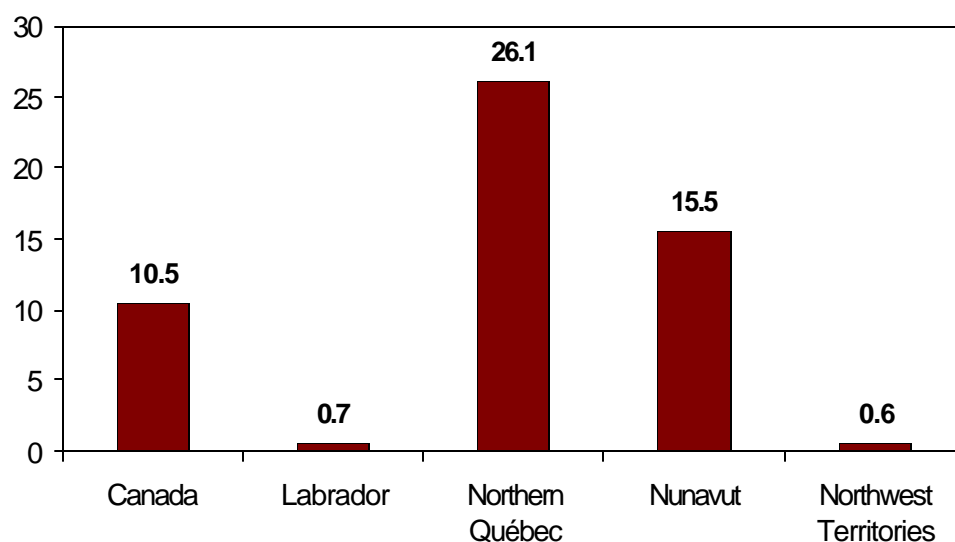


Among Inuit aged 0-4 years⁷, 30% could not converse in one of the two official languages. For Inuit seniors, the figure stood at 43%. Clearly, many Inuit are learning English or French later in life during their school years. Those in the 15-24 and 25-44 year age groups were the most likely to know English or French well enough to converse. These are the ages at which Inuit are most likely to be attending school outside of their communities or working. They may be less likely to use Inuktitut, particularly if they are not living or working with other Inuktitut speakers. Less than 2% of Inuit in these two age groups could not have a conversation in English or French.

⁷ For children who had not yet learned to speak, the person answering the census on their behalf was to report the language(s) that the child was learning to speak at home.

While the majority of Inuit in all regions could converse in either English or French, there were large differences from one region to the next (Figure 8). In both the Northwest Territories and Labrador, less than 1% did not know English or French well enough to carry on a conversation. This rose to 16% in Nunavut and 26% in northern Québec.

Figure 8
Inuit Unable to Have a Conversation in English or French by Region, 2001



5. Summary

In 2001, the Inuktitut language remained strong among Inuit in the north of Canada, while there were few southern Inuit who used the language. From 1981 to 2001, there was some erosion of the language. Older Inuit were more likely than younger Inuit, and especially those of working age, to report an Inuktitut mother tongue and home language. The strength of the language was not uniform across regions, as Inuktitut was much stronger in northern Québec and Nunavut than in Labrador and the Northwest Territories. While the majority of Inuit could converse in English or French, those in the youngest and oldest age groups were less likely to be able to do so. Similarly, over one-quarter of Inuit in northern Québec could not converse in one of the two official languages.

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