

Catalogue no. 98-200-X2016010
ISBN 978-0-660-09115-0

Census in Brief

Linguistic diversity and multilingualism in Canadian homes

Census of Population, 2016

Release date: August 2, 2017



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- . not available for any reference period
- .. not available for a specific reference period
- ... not applicable
- 0 true zero or a value rounded to zero
- 0^s value rounded to 0 (zero) where there is a meaningful distinction between true zero and the value that was rounded
- ^P preliminary
- ^r revised
- X suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the *Statistics Act*
- ^E use with caution
- F too unreliable to be published
- * significantly different from reference category ($p < 0.05$)

Published by authority of the Minister responsible for Statistics Canada

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Highlights

- The number of people who reported an immigrant mother tongue rose from 6,838,715 in 2011 to 7,749,115 in 2016. This is an increase of 910,400 people or 13.3%.
- In 2016, 2.4% of Canadians reported more than one mother tongue, compared with 1.9% of Canadians in 2011.
- In 2016, 19.4% of Canadians reported speaking more than one language at home, up from 2011 (17.5%).
- In 2016, 7 in 10 people with a mother tongue other than English or French spoke one of these languages at home.

Introduction

Linguistic diversity is on the rise in Canada. More and more Canadians are reporting a mother tongue or language spoken at home¹ other than English or French.

Languages other than English and French, referred to as “other languages”,² can be divided into two broad categories: Aboriginal languages and immigrant languages. Aboriginal languages refer to languages (other than English and French) traditionally spoken by the Aboriginal peoples of Canada, i.e., First Nations (North American Indians), Métis and Inuit. Immigrant languages refer to languages whose presence is initially due to immigration after English and French colonization.

The growth of linguistic diversity does not necessarily mean that more and more languages are being reported in the Census as a mother tongue or language spoken at home. Instead, it means that more and more respondents are reporting a language other than English or French. Many languages were reported in the 2016 Census; statistics are presented on 215 of them.

There are more people who speak an Aboriginal language at home than people with an Aboriginal mother tongue

Linguistic diversity in Canada is reflected first in the presence of many Aboriginal languages. The 2016 Census of Population provides data on close to 70 of these languages.

In addition to Cree languages, seven Aboriginal languages had at least 5,000 people who reported one of them as their mother tongue in 2016: Inuktitut, Ojibway, Oji-Cree, Dene, Montagnais (Innu), Mi'kmaq and Atikamekw.

1. Since 2001, the Census of Population has included a two-part question on the languages spoken at home. The first part asks about the language spoken most often at home, while the second part asks the language or languages spoken regularly at home in addition to the main language, if applicable. For each part, multiple responses are accepted. In this article, the statistics on language spoken at home include, unless otherwise indicated, all individuals who reported that language in part A or B, alone or with another language. “Main home language” or “main language spoken at home” refers to part A (language spoken most often at home), and “secondary language” refers to part B (other language spoken on a regular basis).

2. The expressions “other mother tongue” or “other language” refer to languages other than English and French. These include Aboriginal and immigrant languages. Other languages also include sign languages, which are not included in Aboriginal or immigrant languages. In 2016, just over 27,000 people reported a sign language as the language used to communicate at home. The expression “non-official languages” also refer to the same concept.

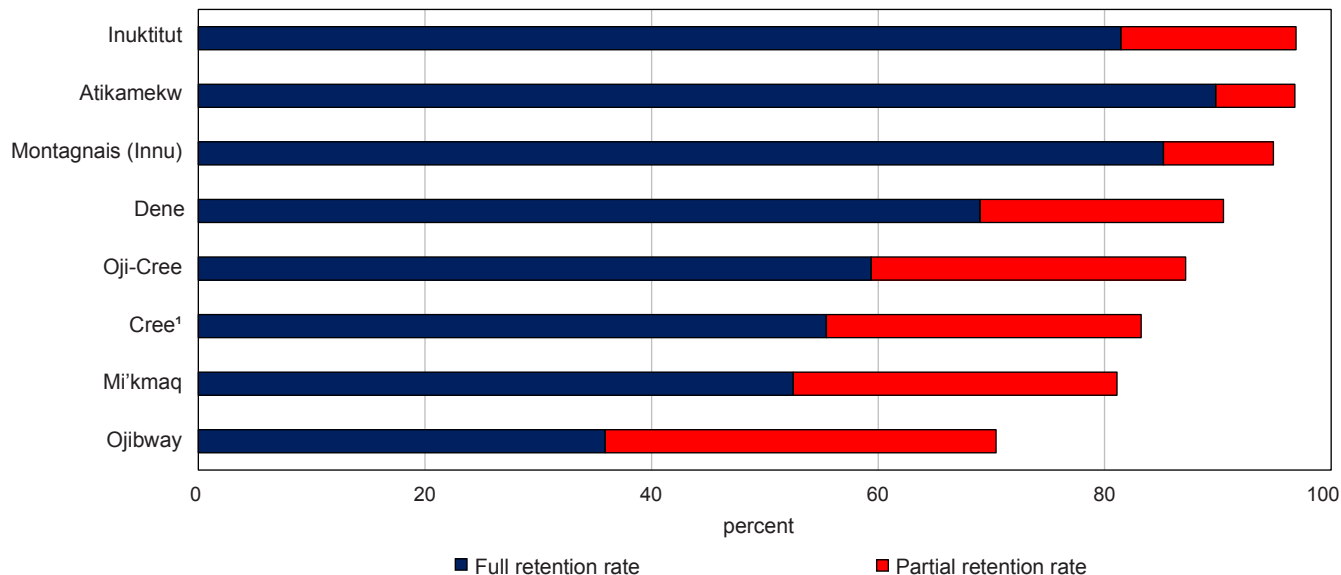
Linguistic diversity and multilingualism in Canadian homes

A great many people with Inuktitut, Atikamekw or Montagnais (Innu) as their mother tongue speak that language at home. The eight Aboriginal languages presented all had a retention rate in excess of 70%. The term “retention” refers to people with a given mother tongue who speak that language at home.³

Chart 1

Full or partial retention rate for the eight main Aboriginal mother tongues, Canada, 2016

Mother tongues



1. The category “Cree” includes Plains Cree, Woods Cree, Swampy Cree, Northeastern Cree, Moose Cree, Southeastern Cree, and the category “Cree n.o.s.” The abbreviation “n.o.s.” means “not otherwise specified”.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016.

While some people with an Aboriginal mother tongue do not speak that language at home, others adopt those languages without them being their mother tongue. Overall, the number of people who speak an Aboriginal language at home (228,770 people) is higher than the number of people who have an Aboriginal mother tongue (213,230 people). There were 137,520 people who reported an Aboriginal language as the main language spoken at home, and 91,250 people who reported an Aboriginal language as a secondary language.

Strong increase in immigrant languages

The increase in other languages in Canada is mostly due to the increase in immigrant languages, international migration being the main driver of population growth in the country.

The number of people who reported an immigrant mother tongue rose from 6,838,715 in 2011 to 7,749,115 in 2016. This is an increase of 910,400 people or 13.3%.

3. Retention is said to be “full” when that language is spoken most often, and “partial” when it is spoken regularly, but it is not the main language spoken at home.

Linguistic diversity and multilingualism in Canadian homes

In 2016, 22 immigrant mother tongues each had a population of more than 100,000 people. This is the same number of languages as in 2011.⁴ Combined, these 22 mother tongues comprised more than 6.3 million people in 2016, or 81.5% of the population with an immigrant mother tongue. In 2011, the 22 languages with each more than 100,000 people totalled close to 5.6 million people.

Table 1
Immigrant mother tongues with more than 100,000 people in 2016, Canada

Language	Rank in 2016	Rank in 2011	Change	2011	2016	Difference	Change from 2011 to 2016
				number	number		percent
Mandarin ¹	1	9	+8	255,160	610,835	355,675	139.4
Cantonese ¹	2	6	+4	388,935	594,030	205,095	52.7
Punjabi	3	1	-2	459,990	543,495	83,505	18.2
Tagalog (Pilipino, Filipino)	4	7	+3	384,050	510,420	126,370	32.9
Spanish	5	3	-2	439,110	495,090	55,980	12.7
Arabic	6	8	+2	374,410	486,530	112,120	29.9
Italian	7	4	-3	437,725	407,465	-30,260	-6.9
German	8	5	-3	430,055	404,745	-25,310	-5.9
Urdu	9	12	+3	194,095	243,095	49,000	25.2
Portuguese	10	10	0	225,530	237,000	11,470	5.1
Persian (Farsi)	11	13	+2	177,015	225,155	48,140	27.2
Russian	12	14	+2	169,950	195,915	25,965	15.3
Polish	13	11	-2	201,240	191,770	-9,470	-4.7
Vietnamese	14	15	+1	153,355	166,825	13,470	8.8
Korean	15	17	+2	142,880	160,455	17,575	12.3
Tamil	16	16	0	143,395	157,125	13,730	9.6
Hindi	17	21	+4	106,305	133,930	27,625	26.0
Gujarati	18	22	+4	101,310	122,455	21,145	20.9
Greek	19	19	0	117,890	116,460	-1,430	-1.2
Ukrainian	20	18	-2	120,265	110,580	-9,685	-8.1
Dutch	21	20	-1	116,280	104,505	-11,775	-10.1
Romanian	22	23	+1	93,135	100,610	7,475	8.0

1. The increase of Mandarin and Cantonese is due in large part to changes to data collection. New instructions in the electronic questionnaire, asking respondents to indicate the Chinese language spoken at home or that was first learned as a child (mother tongue), as applicable, resulted in a sharp increase in certain Chinese languages, particularly Mandarin and Cantonese.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2011 and 2016.

Of the mother tongue population that had more than 100,000 people each in 2016, Tagalog (Pilipino) (+32.9%), Arabic (+29.9%), Persian (Farsi) (+27.2%), Hindi (+26.0%), and Urdu (+25.2%) saw increases in excess of 25%.⁵ On the other hand, fewer people reported Greek (-1.2%), Polish (-4.7%), German (-5.9%), Italian (-6.9%), Ukrainian (-8.1%) and Dutch (-10.1%) as their mother tongue in 2016 than in 2011.

4. In 2016, Romanian was added to the list, while the category of "Chinese, n.o.s." was removed. For the latter, the decline is related to instructions added to the electronic questionnaire that asked respondents who indicated "Chinese" to specify the language in question. The increase in the number of people reporting specific Chinese languages (Mandarin, Cantonese, etc.) is also, to some extent, attributable to this change. The category "Chinese n.o.s." as a mother tongue, which had 441,260 people in 2011, fell to 40,960 in 2016.

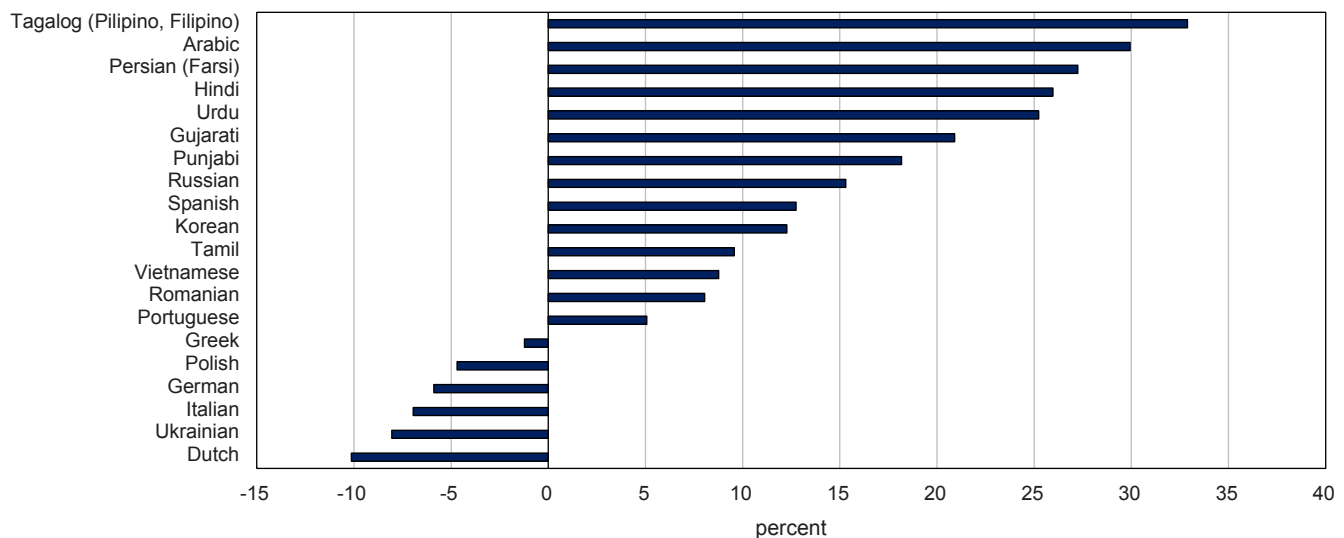
5. Mandarin and Cantonese saw greater growth, but this is due in large part to changes to the data collection method. Overall, Chinese mother tongues posted a 17.4% increase.

Linguistic diversity and multilingualism in Canadian homes

Chart 2

Change from 2011 to 2016 in the population of certain immigrant mother tongues, Canada

Mother tongue



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2011 and 2016.

In 2016, 75.5% of people with an immigrant mother tongue lived in one of the six largest census metropolitan areas (CMAs): Montréal, Ottawa–Gatineau, Toronto, Calgary, Edmonton and Vancouver.

In Toronto, Calgary, Edmonton and Vancouver, the five main immigrant mother tongues are primarily Asian languages.

In Vancouver, the population of the three most-reported immigrant mother tongues (Cantonese, Mandarin and Punjabi) represents 49.2% of all people who reported an immigrant mother tongue in 2016. These mother tongues are also the top three in Toronto, where people who reported them made up 24.8% of the population with an immigrant mother tongue.

In Calgary and Edmonton, Tagalog, Punjabi and Cantonese were in the top spots, in that order.

In Montréal and Ottawa–Gatineau, Arabic is the main immigrant mother tongue. Mandarin is the only Asian language in the top five in the Montréal CMA.

Linguistic diversity and multilingualism in Canadian homes

Table 2

The five most-reported immigrant mother tongues in the census metropolitan areas of Montréal, Ottawa–Gatineau, Toronto, Calgary, Edmonton and Vancouver, 2016

Montréal			Ottawa–Gatineau		
Language	number	percent	Language	number	percent
Arabic	181,440	18.0	Arabic	47,630	18.6
Spanish	129,860	12.9	Mandarin	20,710	8.1
Italian	109,310	10.9	Spanish	18,610	7.3
Creole languages	65,665	6.5	Cantonese	11,050	4.3
Mandarin	41,835	4.2	Italian	10,465	4.1
Other immigrant languages	478,935	47.6	Other immigrant languages	147,980	57.7
Total	1,007,040	100.0	Total	256,445	100.0

Toronto			Calgary		
Language	number	percent	Language	number	percent
Cantonese	260,355	9.5	Tagalog (Pilipino, Filipino)	47,840	11.4
Mandarin	233,885	8.5	Punjabi	42,135	10.1
Punjabi	186,030	6.8	Cantonese	36,325	8.7
Italian	164,510	6.0	Spanish	30,615	7.3
Tagalog (Pilipino, Filipino)	161,510	5.9	Mandarin	29,765	7.1
Other immigrant languages	1,732,515	63.3	Other immigrant languages	231,870	55.4
Total	2,738,800	100.0	Total	418,550	100.0

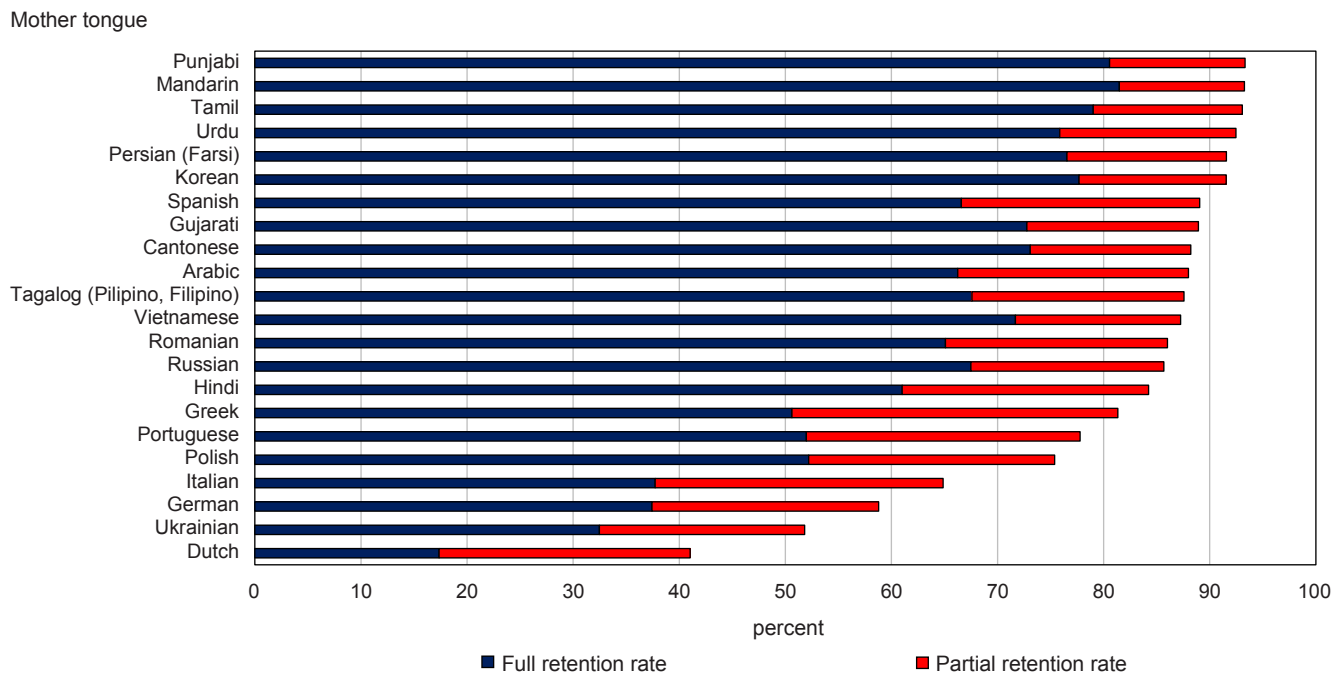
Edmonton			Vancouver		
Language	number	percent	Language	number	percent
Tagalog (Pilipino, Filipino)	42,530	12.4	Cantonese	193,035	17.7
Punjabi	30,110	8.8	Mandarin	180,170	16.5
Cantonese	23,955	7.0	Punjabi	163,400	15.0
Mandarin	20,680	6.1	Tagalog (Pilipino, Filipino)	78,825	7.2
Arabic	20,370	6.0	Korean	47,920	4.4
Other immigrant languages	204,065	59.7	Other immigrant languages	427,905	39.2
Total	341,700	100.0	Total	1,091,260	100.0

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016.

The retention rates, i.e., speaking one's mother tongue at home, are generally quite high for the 22 main immigrant mother tongues. This rate is above 80% for 16 languages, including all Asian languages. However, some European languages have much lower retention rates. For seven of these languages, the full retention rate is either below or barely above 50%.

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Chart 3
Full or partial retention rate for the 22 main immigrant mother tongues, Canada, 2016



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016.

Increase in multiple responses

Census data provide several ways to measure multilingualism. There has been an increase in the number of multiple responses to the questions on mother tongue and languages spoken at home.

In 2016, 2.4% of Canadians reported having more than one mother tongue, compared with 1.9% in 2011. Three-quarters of the increase in multiple responses between 2011 and 2016 is due to the increase in the number of people who reported an “other” mother tongue along with English.

In 2016, 19.4% of Canadians reported speaking more than one language at home,⁶ up from 2011 (17.5%). This gain is primarily driven by an increase in multiple responses to the question on the language spoken most often at home.

6. This can be a multiple response in part A on the main language spoken at home or a combination of responses to parts A and B (secondary language).

Languages intermingle in Canadian homes

Multilingualism can also mean speaking a different language from the mother tongue⁷ at home. Almost 7.6 million Canadians reported speaking a language other than their mother tongue at home at least on a regular basis.

Across Canada, 1.1 million people whose mother tongue is English (5.7%) speak a language other than their mother tongue at home. In most cases, it is a secondary language in addition to English, which is the main language.

Proportionally, people whose mother tongue is French are three times more likely (16.9%) than English-mother-tongue individuals to speak a language other than their mother tongue at home, or 1.2 million people. In this case, the main language spoken is English.

People with a mother tongue other than English or French are much more likely to speak a language other than their mother tongue at home. In 2016, 5.3 million people with a non-official mother tongue reported speaking a language other than their mother tongue at least on a regular basis at home (without necessarily having abandoned their mother tongue).

Only 28.0% of people with an “other” mother tongue spoke only their mother tongue at home. By comparison, 94.3% of people with English as their mother tongue and 83.1% of people with French as their mother tongue speak only their mother tongue at home.

Table 3
Mother tongue spoken at home, by mother tongue, Canada, 2016

Mother tongue spoken at home	Mother tongue ¹					
	English		French		Other	
	number	percent	number	percent	number	percent
Speak only their mother tongue	18,410,615	94.3	5,905,265	83.1	2,051,550	28.0
Speak their mother tongue together with another language	1,019,470	5.2	948,695	13.3	3,994,780	54.6
Do not speak their mother tongue	89,005	0.5	254,485	3.6	1,274,750	17.4
Total	19,519,090	100.0	7,108,450	100.0	7,321,080	100.0

1. Single responses only.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016.

People with a non-official mother tongue who use a language other than their mother tongue at home usually adopt English or French as their main language or as a secondary language. In 2016, 7 in 10 people with a mother tongue other than English or French spoke one of these languages at home.

In a context of large-scale immigration, multilingualism is evidence of the official languages making their way into the homes of Canadians of all origins. It also shows that Canada’s official languages continue to be important as the country’s linguistic landscape diversifies.

7. Only single responses for mother tongue are taken into consideration in this section and the next.

The importance of the majority language

English-mother-tongue individuals (single responses) in Quebec (32.6%) are much more likely to speak a language other than their mother tongue at home than those in other provinces and territories (4.7%). In Quebec, 27.6% of people whose mother tongue is English speak French at home: 11.1% as the main language and 16.5% as a secondary language. Outside Quebec, 3.5% of people with English as their mother tongue speak an “other” language at home.

Similarly, 9.5% of people whose mother tongue is French in Quebec speak a language other than their mother tongue at home (7.9% speak English). Outside Quebec, 65.7% of people whose mother tongue is French speak another language at home, primarily English (64.6%).

Overall, 72.0% of people with a non-official mother tongue speak a language other than their mother tongue at home. This proportion is similar in Quebec and in all other provinces and territories. However, the language spoken, as applicable, differs by area of residence.

In Quebec, 22.1% of people with a mother tongue other than English or French reported English as their main home language, and 13.7% as a secondary language. French is spoken by 47.9% of people with an “other” mother tongue (29.4% as their main home language and 18.6% as a secondary language). These proportions include 12.1% who speak both English and French at home.

In Canada outside Quebec, 48.1% of people with a mother tongue other than English or French speak primarily English, and 21.2% speak it as a secondary language. Only 1.1% of people with an “other” mother tongue speak French at home.

These statistics show the attraction that the majority official language has on other mother tongue groups.

Data sources, methods and definitions

Data sources

The data in this analysis are from the 2016 Census of Population. Further information on the census can be found in the [Guide to the Census of Population, 2016](http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/ref/98-304/index-eng.cfm) (<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/ref/98-304/index-eng.cfm>), Catalogue no. 98-304-X.

Specific information on the quality and comparability of census data on language can be found in the [Language Reference Guide, Census of Population, 2016](http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/ref/guides/003/98-500-x2016003-eng.cfm) (<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/ref/guides/003/98-500-x2016003-eng.cfm>), Catalogue no. 98-500-X2016003.

Methods

Random rounding and percentage distributions: To ensure the confidentiality of responses collected for the 2016 Census, a random rounding process is used to alter the values reported in individual cells. As a result, when these data are summed or grouped, the total value may not match the sum of the individual values, since the total and subtotals are independently rounded. Similarly, percentage distributions, which are calculated on rounded data, may not necessarily add up to 100%.

Because of random rounding, counts and percentages may vary slightly between different census products, such as the analytical documents, highlight tables and data tables.

Definitions

Please refer to the [Dictionary, Census of Population, 2016](http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/ref/dict/index-eng.cfm) (<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/ref/dict/index-eng.cfm>), Catalogue no. 98-301-X, for additional information on the census variables.

Additional information

Additional analyses on language can be found in *The Daily* (<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/170802/dq170802b-eng.htm>) of August 2, 2017, and in the Census in Brief articles entitled *English–French bilingualism reaches new heights* (<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/170802/dq170802b-eng.htm>), Catalogue no. 98-200-X2016009 and *English, French and official language minorities in Canada* (<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/98-200-x/2016011/98-200-x2016011-eng.cfm>), Catalogue no. 98-200-X2016011.

Additional information on language can be found in the *Highlight tables* (<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/hlt-fst/lang/index-eng.cfm>), Catalogue no. 98-402-X2016005; the *Data tables* (<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/dt-td/Lp-eng.cfm?LANG=E&APATH=3&DETAIL=0&DIM=0&FL=A&FREE=0&GC=0&GID=0&GK=0&GRP=1&PID=0&PRID=10&PTYPE=109445&S=0&SHOWALL=0&SUB=0&Temporal=2016&THEME=118&VID=0&VNAMEE=&VNAMEF=>), Catalogue nos. 98-400-X2016045 to 98-400-X2016079 and 98-400-X2016343 to 98-400-X2016345; the *Census Profile* (<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E>), Catalogue no. 98-316-X2016001; and the *Focus on Geography Series* (<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/fogs-spg/Index-eng.cfm>), Catalogue no. 98-404-X2016001.

An infographic entitled *Immigrant languages in Canada, 2016 Census of Population* (<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-627-m/11-627-m2017025-eng.htm>) also illustrates some key findings on immigrant languages in Canada.

For details on the concepts, definitions and variables used in the 2016 Census of Population, please consult the *Dictionary, Census of Population, 2016* (<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/ref/dict/index-eng.cfm>), Catalogue no. 98-301-X.

In addition to response rates and other data quality information, the *Guide to the Census of Population, 2016* (<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/ref/98-304/index-eng.cfm>), Catalogue no. 98-304-X, provides an overview of the various phases of the census, including content determination, sampling design, collection, data processing, data quality assessment, confidentiality guidelines and dissemination.

Acknowledgments

This report was prepared by Jean-François Lepage of Statistics Canada's Social and Aboriginal Statistics Division, with the assistance of other staff members of that division and the collaboration of staff members of the Census Subject Matter Secretariat, Census Operations Division, and Communications and Dissemination Branch.