
Census in Brief

Speaking of work: Languages of work across Canada

Census of Population, 2021



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Highlights

- While the number and proportion of Canadians who spoke a language other than English or French at home reached their highest levels on record in 2021, English and French remained the languages of convergence at work across Canada, used most often by 98.7% of workers.
- In 2021, the census questions on languages used at work were modified, which reduced respondents' burden and improved the quality of the data. However, this change affects comparability with previous census cycles to a certain extent (see box titled "A better picture of languages used at work, but an impact on comparability with previous censuses").
- In 2021, 77.1% of employed persons in Canada mainly used English at work, 19.9% mainly used French, and 1.7% used English and French equally; 1.3% used neither English nor French most often at work.
- In Quebec, 79.9% of workers mainly used French at work, 14.0% mainly used English, and 5.4% used English and French equally. The proportion of workers who mainly used French at work decreased slightly compared to 2016.
- In the Montréal census metropolitan area, the industrial sectors where the main use of French at work decreased the most from 2001 to 2021 were the information and cultural industries; the finance and insurance sector; as well as the professional, scientific and technical services.
- In New Brunswick, 20.1% of workers mainly used French at work, 75.9% of workers mainly used English, and 3.9% used English and French equally at work. The proportion of workers in the province who mainly use French at work has been trending downwards since 2001.
- Outside Quebec and New Brunswick, 1 in 10 workers knew French, and one-third of them used it regularly at work. Across the country, it is in educational services that French was most widely used.
- In Canada, 40,000 workers used an Indigenous language regularly at work. Around half of workers who knew an Indigenous language used an Indigenous language regularly at work.

Introduction

Census information on languages used at work allows us to better understand the use of languages in the public sphere across Canada.

[In 2021, the number and proportion of Canadians whose mother tongue or language spoken at home was a language other than English or French reached record highs since these data were first collected.](#) However, this result refers to the use of languages in the private sphere. At work, English and French remain the languages of convergence across the country.

In 2021, the vast majority (98.7%) of people who were employed in the week preceding the census used English or French most often at work and 99.3% used at least one of these languages on a regular basis. At the national level, 77.1% of workers mainly¹ used English at work, 19.9% of workers mainly used French, and 1.7% used English and French equally.

However, the use of languages at work varied greatly from region to region.

Among workers residing in Quebec, 4 in 5 (79.9%) mainly used French at work in 2021, while 1 in 7 (14.0%) mainly used English. In New Brunswick, 1 in 5 workers (20.1%) mainly used French at work and 3 in 4 (75.9%) mainly used English.

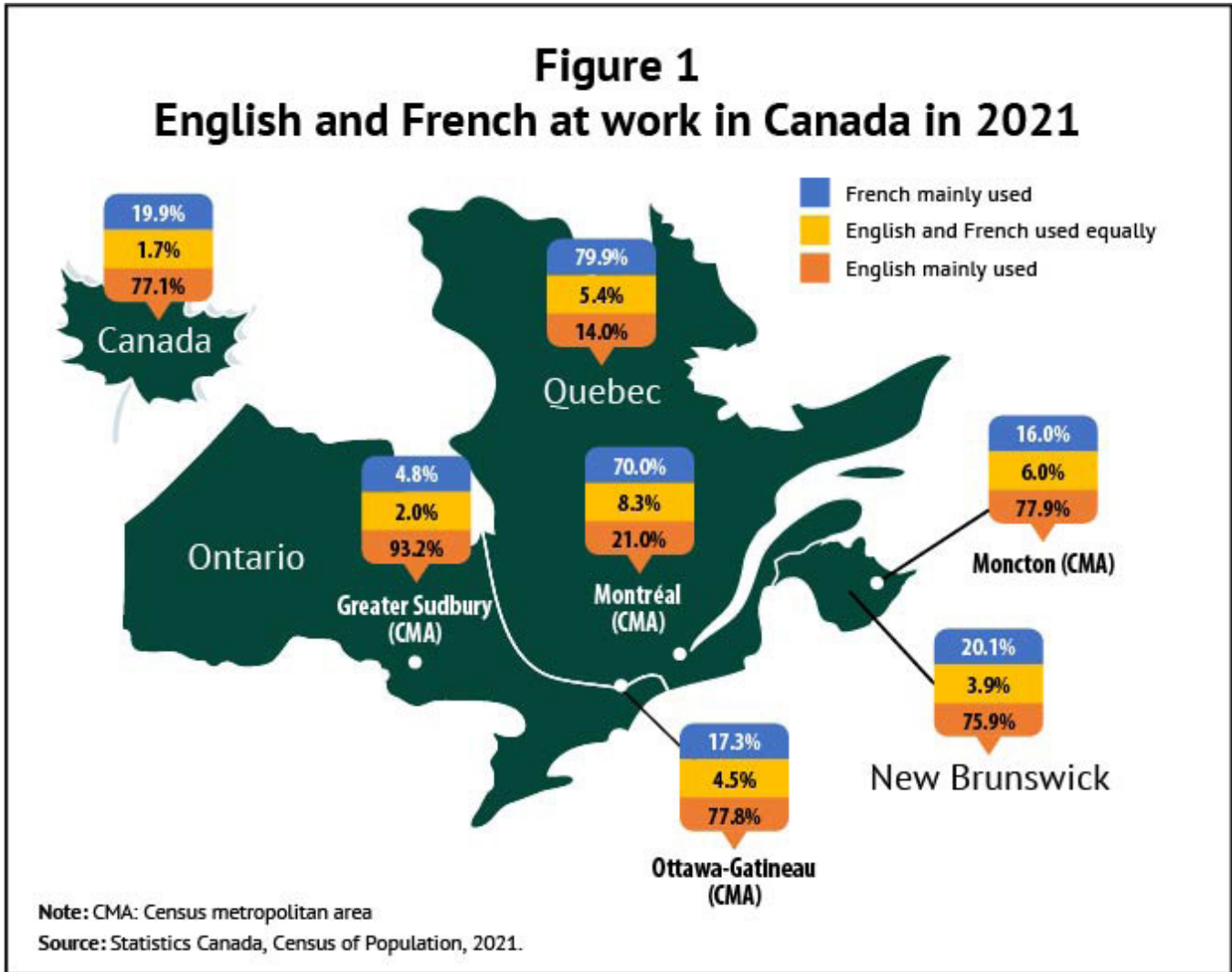
1. In this report, those who "mainly" used English or French are those who used only one of these two languages most often at work. It excludes people who said that they used English and French equally, but includes those who used English or French equally with a non-official language.

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Outside these two provinces, although there was a notable presence of French in some regions and industry sectors, overall, English was the predominant official language in most workplaces.

Meanwhile, Indigenous languages occupied an important place in the workplaces of some specific regions. For instance, Inuktitut and other Inuit languages were used regularly at work by 43% of workers in Nunavut, and by 77% of workers in Nunavik in northern Quebec.

This report provides an overview of the languages used at work in different regions across Canada.



A better picture of languages used at work, but an impact on comparability with previous censuses

In 2021, changes were made to the census questions regarding languages used at work, which reduced respondents' burden and improved data quality.

In previous censuses, respondents were asked to first indicate the language they used most often at work, and then to list the other languages they regularly used at work. In the 2021 Census, respondents were first asked to provide the languages they regularly used at work. If they provided more than one answer to this first question, they then had to indicate which of these languages they used most often at work. Thanks to this change, 88% of respondents only had to answer one question on this topic rather than two.

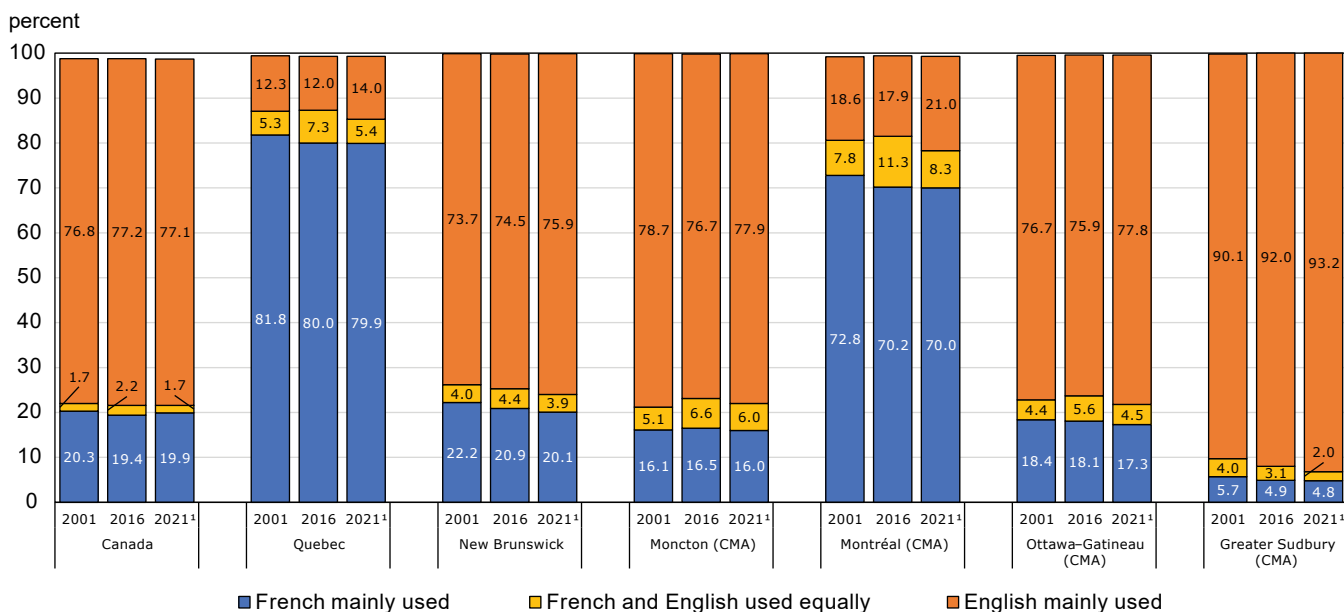
In addition, the census tests showed that the new version of the questions was better understood by respondents and that it eliminated some of the confusion caused by the old version. Although it is estimated that the 2021 data are of better quality and provide a more accurate portrait of the languages used regularly and most often at work, the changes made to the question have an impact on comparability with data from previous census cycles.

The data on languages used most often at work can be compared with data from previous cycles, but any comparison must be done with caution and must consider the effects of the change to the question. More specifically, based on the results of the 2019 Census Test, we know that this change led to a decrease in the proportion of workers who said they used more than one language equally most often (multiple responses), and to a corresponding increase in the proportion of workers who said that they used only one language most often (single responses). Comparisons with previous cycles should take into account the full distribution of single and multiple responses.

Furthermore, data on all languages used regularly at work (but not necessarily used most often) should not be compared with data from previous cycles. The new version of the questions led to a decrease in the number of people who reported regularly using languages other than the one they used most often.

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Chart 1
Use of English and French most often at work, selected provinces and metropolitan areas, 2001, 2016 and 2021



1. Comparisons between 2021 data and data from previous census cycles must be made with caution. See "A better portrait of languages used at work, but an effect on comparability with previous census cycles". Includes people employed during the census reference week.

Sources: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2001, 2016 and 2021.

In Quebec, the proportion of workers who mainly use French at work has followed a downward trend

Quebec is the only Canadian province where French is used by a majority of workers. In 2021, 79.9% of workers residing in Quebec mainly used French at work, 14.0% mainly used English, and 5.4% used English and French equally.

In total, 92.1% of workers living in Quebec used French at work on a regular basis, 35.4% of workers used English regularly, and 2.3% of workers used a language other than English or French regularly at work.

Quebec is also characterized by a high prevalence of plurilingualism in the workplace. In all the provinces and territories, Quebec ranked second for the proportion of workers who used more than one language regularly at work (28.7% of workers), behind Nunavut (39.6% of workers). In Quebec, combinations of English and French were the most common (26.7% of workers), while in Nunavut, it was mainly Inuktitut and English. That being said, most workers (63.8%) in Quebec only used French at work on a regular basis.

Compared to 2016, the proportion of workers in Quebec who mainly used French at work was slightly down in 2021, while the proportion of workers who mainly used English rose. This rise in the proportion of workers using mainly English results in part from the change to the question on languages used at work. This change led people to declare less frequently using both English and French equally, and to declare more frequently using mainly a single one of these languages. Correspondingly, considering the change in the question, the apparent stability in the proportion of workers using mainly French must be interpreted as a downward trend (see box titled "A better picture of languages used at work, but an impact on comparability with previous censuses").

These general trends reflect larger changes in certain specific industrial sectors. From 2016 to 2021, the proportion of workers mainly using French fell the most in the information and cultural industries (from 68.1% in

2016 to 62.3% in 2021), in the finance and insurance sector (74.3% to 71.0%), as well as in the professional, scientific and technical services (69.2% to 65.7%). These sectors were already among those with the lowest rate of main use of French at work in 2016.

Various factors may be associated with the downward trend in the main use of French at work and the upward trend in the main use of English from 2016 to 2021. For example, workers' knowledge of languages evolved. The proportion of workers in Quebec who knew English—that is, who could hold a conversation in English—rose from 60.3% in 2016 to 62.9% in 2021, while the rate of knowledge of French decreased from 96.1% to 95.2% over the same period. The proportion of workers who knew French but not English fell from 39.5% to 36.8%, while the proportion of those who knew English but not French increased from 3.7% to 4.5%. Among workers in Quebec in 2021 who knew English but not French, around one-third were not living in Quebec in 2016 (8% were interprovincial migrants and 24% were international migrants).

Based on workers' place of residence, the Quebec regions² with the largest proportions of workers who mainly used English at work were the Pontiac Regional County Municipality (RCM) (69%), the Collines-de-l'Outaouais RCM (38%) and the city of Gatineau (35%), all three being located in the Outaouais region. They were followed by Montréal Island (32%) and Nord-du-Québec (31%). On account of the size of its population, Montréal Island alone was the place of residence for just over half (53%) of Quebec workers who mainly used English at work. The Montréal metropolitan area overall was home to 77% of Quebec workers who mainly used English at work.

In Montréal, increases in workers mainly using English in the information and cultural industries, finance and insurance, and professional, scientific and technical services sectors

The language dynamics in the Montréal census metropolitan area (CMA) are complex and diverse, first because of its large English-speaking minority, but also because of the high rates of plurilingualism that characterize its population. Among workers in the Montréal CMA, 80% were at least bilingual (69% specifically English–French bilingual) and 28% were at least trilingual, by far the highest proportions among Canada's large urban centres. Plurilingual people can use different languages in different spheres of their lives (at home, at work, etc.).

In the Montréal CMA, 70.0% of workers mainly used French at work (a proportion almost identical to 2016), 21.0% mainly used English (compared with 17.9% in 2016) and 8.3% used English and French equally. Once again, the effect of the change to the question on languages used at work gives the impression that the increase in the main use of English is larger than it really was, and it hides a downward trend in the main use of French.

Over a somewhat longer period—from 2001 to 2021—the proportion of workers who mainly used French at work in the Montréal CMA fell from 72.8% to 70.1%. Similar to what was observed throughout the province, this decrease was more pronounced in certain industrial sectors. From 2001 to 2021, the rate of main use of French decreased from 69% to 56% in the information and cultural industries, from 71% to 60% in the finance and insurance sector, and from 66% to 56% in professional, scientific and technical services. In contrast, some sectors posted an increase in the main use of French, such as health care and social assistance (from 78% to 80%).

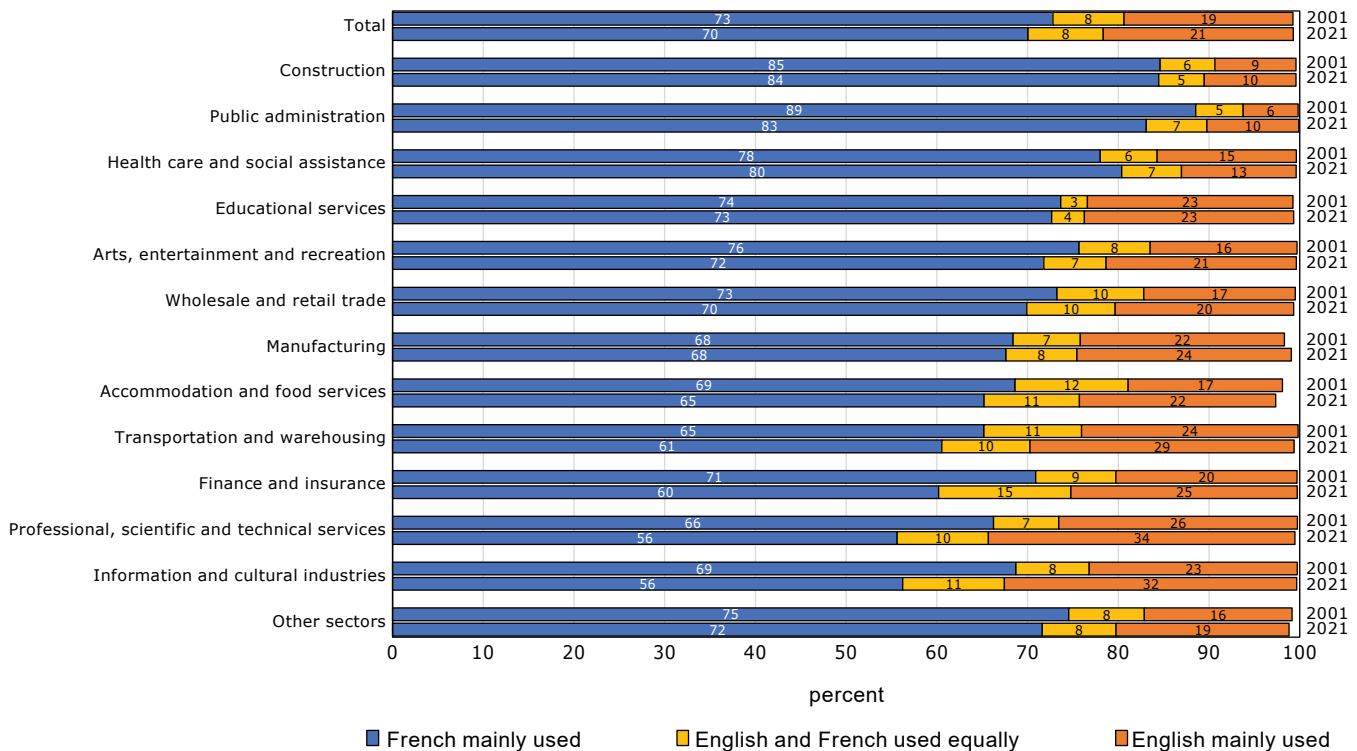
The use of languages at work is partly related to languages spoken at home. In 2021, among workers in the Montréal CMA who predominantly spoke French at home, 89% mainly used French at work, the same proportion as in 2001. Among workers who predominantly spoke English at home in 2021, 64% mainly used English at work, compared with 69% in 2001. Among workers who predominantly spoke a language other than English or French at home, 49% mainly used French at work (compared with 42% in 2001) and 35% primarily mainly used English at work (compared with 36% in 2001). From 2001 to 2021, the proportion of workers in the Montréal CMA who predominantly spoke French at home decreased from 73.1% to 64.6%, while there were increases in the proportions of those who predominantly spoke English (15.8% to 16.8%) or a language other than English or French (8.2% to 11.9%) at home.

2. Based on census divisions.

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[Thematic maps](#) on the use of languages at work in four metropolitan areas where English and French are both widely used—Moncton, Montréal, Ottawa–Gatineau and Greater Sudbury—are also made available today [\[link\]](#).

Chart 2
Use of English and French most often at work in the Montréal census metropolitan area, by industry sector, 2001 and 2021



Sources: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2001 and 2021.

In New Brunswick, a decline in the proportion of workers who mainly use French at work

Among workers living in New Brunswick, 20.1% mainly used French at work in 2021, 75.9% mainly used English, and 3.9% used both English and French equally.

In New Brunswick—Canada’s only officially bilingual province—39% of workers were English–French bilingual, i.e., they reported being able to conduct a conversation in both English and French. This proportion was 81% for workers who predominantly spoke French at home and 23% for workers who predominantly spoke English at home. Among all bilingual workers, just under half (45%) used both these languages on a regular basis at work.

In 2021, the proportion of workers who mainly used French at work was down slightly from 2016 (20.9%), continuing the trend observed since 2001 (22.2%). It is believed that the change made to the question on languages used at work had the effect of slightly dampening this downward trend observed since 2016 (see box entitled “A better picture of languages used at work, but an impact on comparability with previous censuses”).

The use of English and French at work varied greatly by region. In the northern part of the province, namely in the counties of Madawaska, Restigouche and Gloucester, 72% of workers mainly used French at work and 20% of workers mainly used English. In the southeastern part of the province, namely the counties of Kent

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and Westmorland, 24% of workers mainly used French at work and 69% mainly used English. In the rest of the province, 3% of workers mainly used French at work and 95% mainly used English. The northern region accounted for 16% of all workers in New Brunswick, the southeast region accounted for 26%, and the rest of the province accounted for 58%.

Trends over time also varied by region. In northern New Brunswick, contrasting with the provincial trend, the proportion of workers who mainly used French at work increased from 2001 (70.6%) to 2021 (71.9%). Over the same period, this proportion decreased in the southeast (from 28.1% to 24.2%) and in the rest of the province (from 4.1% to 3.4%).

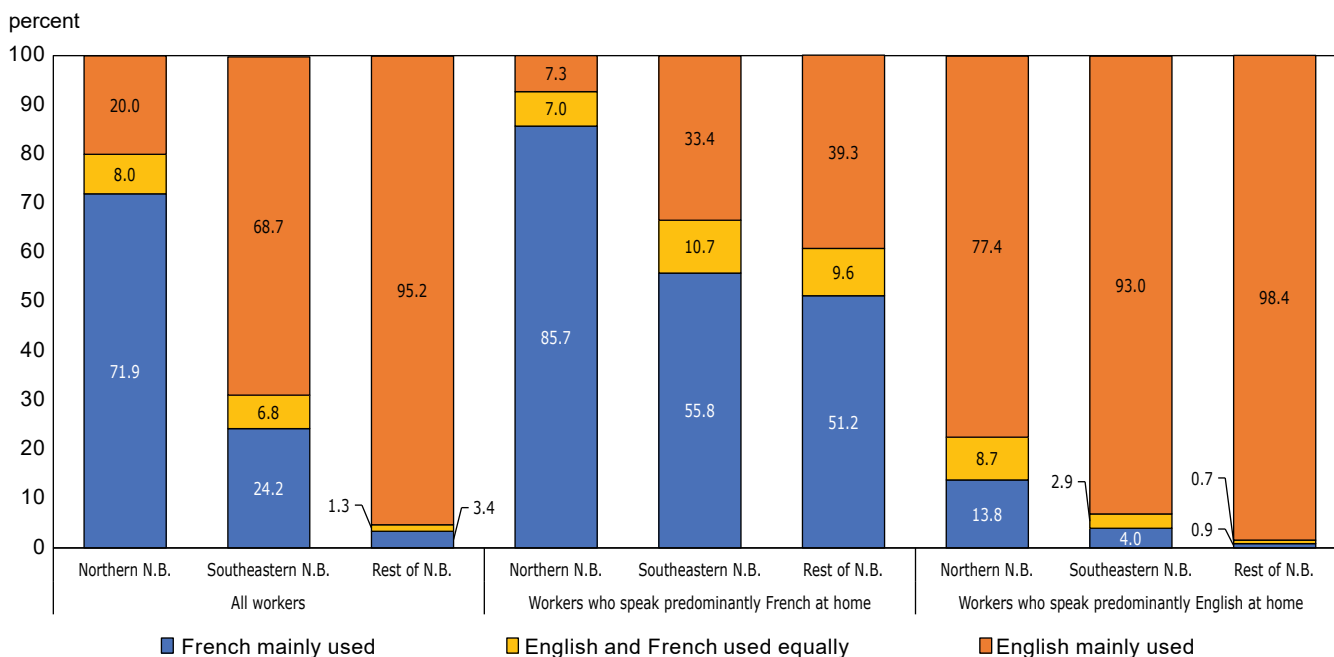
At the provincial level, the industrial sectors with the highest rates of main use of French at work in 2021 were agriculture, forestry, hunting and fishing (34%), educational services (31%), manufacturing (29%), and health care and social assistance (27%). These findings are similar in each of the province's regions. Notably, in southeastern New Brunswick, more people worked mainly in French (51%) than in English (46%) in educational services. This was the case in the elementary and secondary schools as well as in the universities of the region.

As noted earlier, there is a link between languages used at work and languages spoken at home. Among workers who predominantly spoke French at home, 71% mainly used French at work, while among those who predominantly spoke English at home, 96% mainly used English at work.

These proportions varied by region. In northern New Brunswick, 86% of workers who predominantly spoke French at home also mainly used this language at work. This proportion was 56% in the southeastern part of the province and 51% in the rest of the province. Among workers who predominantly spoke English at home, 77% also mainly used English at work in the north, 93% in the southeast and 98% in the rest of the province.

Chart 3

Use of English and French most often at work in New Brunswick, by region and language spoken most often at home, 2021



Sources: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

In Canada outside Quebec and New Brunswick, 1 in 10 workers knew French, among which one-third used it regularly at work

Among workers living outside Quebec and New Brunswick, 9.5% knew French well enough to conduct a conversation, representing just over 1.2 million workers. Of these workers who knew French, 30% used it at least regularly at work and 9% used it mainly.

Consequently, outside Quebec and New Brunswick, 3.0% of workers used French regularly at work, representing close to 400,000 workers. Three-quarters of these workers lived in Ontario, and almost one-third specifically in the Ottawa metropolitan area.

The proportion of workers who regularly used French at work was highest in the federal public administration (18.7%) and educational services (8.1%) sectors. These two sectors accounted for 18% and 20%, respectively, of all workers living outside Quebec and New Brunswick who used French regularly at work. In the case of those working in the federal public administration, the majority lived in the Ottawa area. Those working in educational services were more widely distributed across Canada, though with large concentrations in the Ottawa and Greater Sudbury areas. This reflects the geographic distribution of both the teaching of French (distributed across the country) and of French-language instruction (concentrated in certain places).

New data on language of instruction from the 2021 Census, [released today](#), can be used to shed light on the links that exist between people's educational pathways and the languages they use later in life, including at work. For example, among the roughly 200,000 workers outside Quebec and New Brunswick who did not have French as a mother tongue but did use French regularly at work, more than half had either studied in Canada at a regular French-language school³ (22%) or had taken a French immersion program in an English-language school (31%).

Outside Quebec and New Brunswick, the regions with the highest proportions of workers who used French regularly at work were the counties of Digby (29%) and Yarmouth (14%) in southern Nova Scotia, the United Counties of Prescott and Russell (63%) and Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry (23%) and the city of Ottawa (23%) in eastern Ontario, and the districts of Cochrane (38%), Timiskaming (21%) and Nipissing (17%) as well as the city of Greater Sudbury (18%) in northern Ontario.

Although the proportions of all workers they represent were sometimes small, many workers used French regularly at work in the metropolitan areas of Toronto (57,000), Vancouver (13,000), Winnipeg (12,000), Edmonton (8,000) and Calgary (8,000). In fact, after English, French was the language used regularly by the largest number of workers in each of these cities, except in Vancouver, where Mandarin, Punjabi and Yue (Cantonese) were all more widely used than French.

Half of workers who know an Indigenous language also use an Indigenous language at work

In Canada, 39,600 workers (0.23%) used an Indigenous language regularly at work in 2021, including 23,500 who used it most often (including if it were used equally with other languages).

In some particular regions, Indigenous languages take an important place at work. For instance, this was the case for Inuit languages (Inuktitut), which were used regularly by 9,900 workers, especially in Inuit Nunangat. Inuit languages, including chiefly Inuktitut, were used by 43% of Nunavut workers and by 77% of workers in Nunavik in northern Quebec.

The Indigenous languages that were used regularly by the largest number of workers in Canada were Cree languages, used by 12,900 workers. These languages were used mainly in Quebec and the Prairies.

3. Also includes people who attended both a regular French-language school and a French immersion program in an English-language school.

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Overall, 6% of workers who were themselves Indigenous regularly used an Indigenous language at work. However, this proportion varied by Indigenous identity group. Indigenous languages were used regularly at work by 8% of First Nations workers, 0.3% of Métis workers and 41% of Inuit workers. These differing proportions are largely attributable to differences in the knowledge of Indigenous languages between the Indigenous identity groups. The proportion of workers who knew an Indigenous language well enough to conduct a conversation was 16% among First Nations people, 1% among Métis and 55% among Inuit.

Overall, among workers who knew an Indigenous language, 47% used an Indigenous language regularly at work. Among workers with an Indigenous language as their mother tongue, this proportion was of 55%.

Note on the context associated with the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic had a major impact on the world of work; the effects are reflected in the 2021 Census data. Among other things, the pandemic affected employment rates, industrial composition (i.e., the distribution of employment in different industry sectors) and the proportion of people working at home. This raises the question of whether the pandemic impacted statistics on languages used at work.

During the pandemic, employment levels declined. In May 2021, a large part of this decline had already been offset, albeit unequally by region and category of worker. At aggregate levels, these local variations in employment can somewhat affect the rates of language use at work. For instance, the share of employed people in Canada who lived in Quebec was higher during the 2021 Census (23.7%) than in 2016 (22.9%). This led to an increase in the proportion of workers who used French at work at the national level, since the large majority (95%) of people working mainly in French in Canada lived in Quebec. However, at smaller scales, these types of effects tend to fade.

Moreover, the context of the pandemic caused a decrease in the share of employment in some industrial sectors, such as accommodation and food services, and an increase in other sectors, such as health care and social assistance. However, it can be shown that these changes in industrial composition generally had little impact on the languages used at work. If the weights of the various sectors are adjusted so that the industrial composition in 2021 is identical to what was observed before the pandemic, the general rates of language use at work were hardly affected.

Lastly, the pandemic led to a major increase in the proportion of people working at home, particularly in certain industry sectors. The effect that this could have had on the use of languages at work is not well known at this time. An upcoming analysis of this phenomenon will help to put the 2021 Census results into better context.

Looking ahead

Data on language of work released today will allow for further, more in-depth analyses of language dynamics at work over the next years.

Other analyses and data products on languages will also be released throughout the next year. Among others, Statistics Canada will publish an analysis of the geographic distribution of languages of work in some cities of interest, an analysis of language dynamics within households, a report discussing the evolution of English-French bilingualism in Canada, as well as an analysis of the potential effect of working at home on languages used at work and spoken at home.

In addition to the [data tables](#) on language of work that are released today, additional tables—including historical tables allowing for comparisons over several census cycles—will be published in the next months.

The most recent data, analysis and references on languages by Statistics Canada can be found on the [Language Statistics](#) portal.

Definitions, concepts and geography

The statistics presented in this document include people who were employed during the 2021 Census reference week (May 2 to 8, 2021). This reference population is that which is used by default in most 2021 Census analytical and data visualization products. This reference population is different from the one used in previous census cycles. Generally speaking, in those cycles, all individuals who had been employed at some point since January 1 of the previous year (i.e., for the 2021 Census, January 1, 2020) were considered, even if they were no longer employed at the time of the census. The purpose of this change was to harmonize the dissemination of information on language of work and with that of other labour-related information from the census, as well as to facilitate interpretation of the data by users. The data tables on language of work published today allow users to choose the reference population that suits them.

The 2021 Census question on language of work had two parts. The first part asked about the language or languages used regularly at work. Then, if applicable, the second part asked to specify which of the languages indicated in the first part was used most often. For both parts, multiple responses were allowed.

People who use a language **regularly** include all those who reported using that language regularly, even if they did not use it most often. Individuals using a language **most often** are all those who reported using that language the most often. Individuals using some languages **equally** are those who reported using more than one language most often.

For English and French in particular, persons who **mainly** used one language are those who used only one of these two languages most often at work. It excludes people who said that they used English and French equally, but includes those who used English or French equally with a non-official language.

The question on languages spoken at home follows the same structure as the question on languages used at work. In this report, people speaking a language **predominantly** at home are those who spoke a single language most often at home.

All the results presented in this release are based on 2021 geographic boundaries.

For a detailed definition of the census concepts on language, work or geography, please consult the [Languages Reference Guide, Census of Population, 2021](#), the [Labour Reference Guide, Census of Population, 2021](#), the [Dictionary, Census of Population, 2021](#), or the [conceptual videos](#).

Additional information

Other analyses of 2021 Census data on labour, including on languages of work, are available in the Daily article titled [Jobs in Canada: Navigating changing local labour markets](#).

More detailed information regarding language of work are accessible in the [census data tables](#), the [Census Profile](#), the [Focus on Geography series](#), and the [Census Program Data Viewer](#). [Thematic maps](#) on the languages used at work in four selected metropolitan areas—Moncton, Montréal, Ottawa-Gatineau, and Greater Sudbury—are also available.

New data on instruction in the minority official language are also released today. A [Daily](#) article presents the first analysis of these data.

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