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# Working from home and commuting in the Montréal area according to language profile

by Bertrand Ouellet-Léveillé

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# Working from home and commuting in the Montréal area according to language profile

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## Highlights

- In 2021, a quarter (25.8%) of the 2.1 million workers in the Montréal metropolitan area reported working from home. The proportion of people working from home almost quadrupled from 2016.
- In 2021, working from home was more common among English speakers (35.3%) than French speakers (23.9%). This was observed in the vast majority of boroughs, neighbourhoods, municipalities or regional county municipalities in the Montréal metropolitan area.
- The proportion of people working from home was higher among residents of Montréal Island and Greater Longueuil than elsewhere in the greater metropolitan area. It was also generally higher in the central neighbourhoods of Montréal Island. The proportion of English-speaking workers in these neighbourhoods is relatively higher than in the rest of the metropolitan area.
- Because of the increase in working from home, a decrease in both short commutes, especially on Montréal Island, and long commutes—between the suburbs and Montréal Island—was observed.
- In 2021, there were fewer commutes to a fixed workplace on Montréal Island, especially from a home in the suburbs. However, these commutes were more common among English-speaking workers.
- The proportion of workers in the suburbs who commute within their subregion of residence (Laurentides, Montérégie-Ouest, etc.) remained constant from 2016 to 2021, both among French- and English-speaking workers. These commutes were generally more common among French-speaking workers.
- Working from home became much more common in professional, scientific and technical services as well as in finance and insurance—sectors with relatively high proportions of English-speaking workers.

## Introduction and background

More than 2.1 million residents in the Montréal census metropolitan area were employed at the time of the 2021 Census, i.e., during the week of May 2 to 8, 2021. For about a quarter of these workers, their home was their main place of work, similar to the proportion for Canada (24.3%). This was because of the exceptional measures put into place in many workplaces to limit the spread of COVID-19 and thanks to the technological tools made available to employees in many workplaces.

This article looks at how the unique circumstances of 2021 that drove the increase in working from home affected English- and French-speaking workers differently. It examines how commuting flows in the Montréal metropolitan area differ by language profile in order to broaden our understanding of the dynamics of language groups. Shedding light on and better understanding the particular realities of certain population groups helps to inform potential choices for society regarding transport infrastructure or language policies. Highlighting trends in working from home also helps to determine the potential needs for services in the neighbourhoods where these workers live and work and the language profile of the consumers.

In particular, this article looks at the differences between English- and French-speaking workers in terms of the prevalence of working from home, commuting time between home and work, and the prevalence of commuting between the different subregions of the Montréal metropolitan area. Moreover, it examines the industry of workers in order to provide clues to the factors that may contribute to work-from-home and commuting dynamics.

We observed that working from home replaces both short commutes—especially in the central neighbourhoods of the city of Montréal—and commutes between the suburbs and Montréal Island, both of which are more common among English speakers, compared with commutes within the suburbs, which are more common among French speakers. Furthermore, while working from home generally became more widespread, it was more common in sectors with a relatively higher proportion of English-speaking workers. These factors help to explain why English speakers are more likely than French speakers to work from home in the Montréal area.

The Montréal metropolitan area is of particular interest regarding the dynamics of working from home and commuting among language groups. While the majority of workers predominantly speak French at home, a large proportion predominantly speaks English at home. Moreover, there is a certain heterogeneity in the place of residence of workers according to the different language profiles.<sup>1</sup> French and English speakers are concentrated in different boroughs, neighbourhoods or cities in the metropolitan area. For example, Saint-Laurent Boulevard is an artery that divides Montréal in half. However, this division may be more in the collective imagination rather than a formal division.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, the very geography of the Montréal metropolitan area makes analyzing commuting especially interesting. Its core is Montréal Island, where more than half of the region's jobs are located, and getting to the central neighbourhoods from the suburbs off island can be time-consuming.

## Data, definitions and concepts

### English-speaking person, French-speaking person

For the purposes of this analysis, the language profile of workers is determined by the **language spoken predominantly at home**.<sup>3</sup> This characteristic was chosen as it enables us to differentiate between languages used at home and at work and to link the language behaviour at home with other concepts related to home (place of residence, commuting, mobility).

### Worker

A worker is a person aged 15 and over who **was employed** during the week of **May 2 to 8, 2021**. For those who had more than one job, the job characteristics collected in the Census of Population—and therefore analyzed in this article—are those of the main job, i.e., the job where the worker spends the most hours.

### Working from home and commuting

Workers whose **main place of work**, i.e., the place they worked the most hours, is their home are considered to work from home. Commuting refers to workers travelling between their place of residence and their main place of work. For those who work at home, it is nil (or zero minutes). According to the Labour Force Survey, although working from home has been somewhat less common since 2021, it still seems to be well established in the Canadian labour market.<sup>4</sup>

Approximately 1 in 10 workers in the Montréal metropolitan area reported having no fixed workplace. The work region and subregion of these workers are not established. Nevertheless, they are included in the totals for workers by place of residence.

### Montréal metropolitan area

The boundaries of a metropolitan area are determined based on commuter flows (travel from home to work) between the core of the region and the neighbouring municipalities.<sup>5</sup> For this study, the Montréal metropolitan area was divided into seven subregions, based on the economic areas that make up the region:

1. The Montréal economic region (for brevity, referred as Montréal Island).
2. The Laval economic region, which includes the city of the same name.

1. Thematic maps — Language of work — Percentage of workers using English at work, 2021, by aggregate dissemination area — Montréal (statcan.gc.ca)

2. Ville de Montréal — Les grandes rues de Montréal — Boulevard Saint-Laurent (Montréal.qc.ca) (French only).

3. "Predominant language spoken at home" refers to the only language spoken **most often** at home. A person is considered to have a given predominant language if they speak only that language at home or, if they speak more than one language at home, they identified that language as the only one spoken **most often** at home. Some people may not speak any language predominantly at home; they reported speaking more than one language **most often**, or in other words, **equally** (4.3% of the population). *The Daily — While English and French are still the main languages spoken in Canada, the country's linguistic diversity continues to grow* (statcan.gc.ca).

4. *The Daily — Has the COVID-19 pandemic changed commuting patterns for good?* (statcan.gc.ca), *The Daily — Labour Force Survey, November 2023* (statcan.gc.ca) and *Flexible work schedules, 2022* (statcan.gc.ca).

3. The part of the Lanaudière economic region located in the Montréal metropolitan area,<sup>6</sup> namely:
  - ▶ L'Assomption and Les Moulins regional county municipalities;
  - ▶ The part of the D'Au-tray and Montcalm regional county municipalities located in the Montréal metropolitan area.
4. The part of the Laurentides economic region located in the Montréal metropolitan area, namely:
  - ▶ The city of Mirabel;
  - ▶ Deux-Montagnes and Thérèse-de-Blainville regional county municipalities;
  - ▶ The part of La Rivière-du-Nord and Argenteuil regional county municipalities located in the Montréal metropolitan area.
5. The Longueuil census division,<sup>7</sup> hereinafter referred to as "Greater Longueuil."
6. The part of the Montérégie economic region, hereinafter referred to as "Montérégie-Ouest," consisting of:
  - ▶ Roussillon regional county municipality;
  - ▶ The part of the Beauharnois–Salaberry and Vaudreuil-Soulanges regional county municipalities located in the Montréal metropolitan area.
7. The part of the Montérégie economic region, hereinafter referred to as "Montérégie-Est," consisting of:
  - ▶ The part of the regional county municipalities of Rouville, La Vallée-du-Richelieu, Le Haut-Richelieu and Marguerite-D'Youville located in the Montréal metropolitan area.

This approach is used to differentiate Montérégie-Est, where French is the predominant language at home for almost all workers, from Montérégie-Ouest, where it is the predominant language for only two-thirds of workers, while recognizing Greater Longueuil as a separate destination for workers from the rest of Montérégie. It was also useful in creating six subregions home to a comparable number of workers, in addition to Montréal Island. Collectively, the six subregions other than Montréal Island are referred to as the "suburbs."

**Table 1**  
**Distribution of workers in the Montréal metropolitan area, by place of residence and language spoken predominantly at home, 2021**

	Total number of workers	Predominant language spoken at home			Combination of languages
		French	English	Other language	
<b>Montréal metropolitan area</b>	<b>2117</b>	<b>64.6</b>	<b>16.8</b>	<b>11.9</b>	<b>6.7</b>
Montréal Island	971	49.3	25.4	16.6	8.7
Laval	213	57.9	16.1	16.6	9.4
Lanaudière	174	91.2	2.4	3.3	3.1
Laurentides	217	88.9	4.7	3.3	3.0
Greater Longueuil	211	71.7	9.3	12.7	6.4
Montérégie-Est	156	93.5	2.7	1.8	2.0
Montérégie-Ouest	176	67.3	20.3	7.6	4.8

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

5. Dictionary, Census of Population, 2021 — Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) and Census Agglomeration (CA) (statcan.gc.ca)

6. See the census Standard Geographical Classification Variant of Standard Geographical Classification (SGC) 2021 for statistical area classification — 462 — Montréal (statcan.gc.ca) for all subdivisions in the Montréal metropolitan area.

7. The Longueuil census division includes the cities of Longueuil, Brossard, Saint-Lambert, Boucherville and Saint-Bruno-de-Montarville.

## Results

### In 2021, the proportion of people working from home was higher than before, especially among English speakers

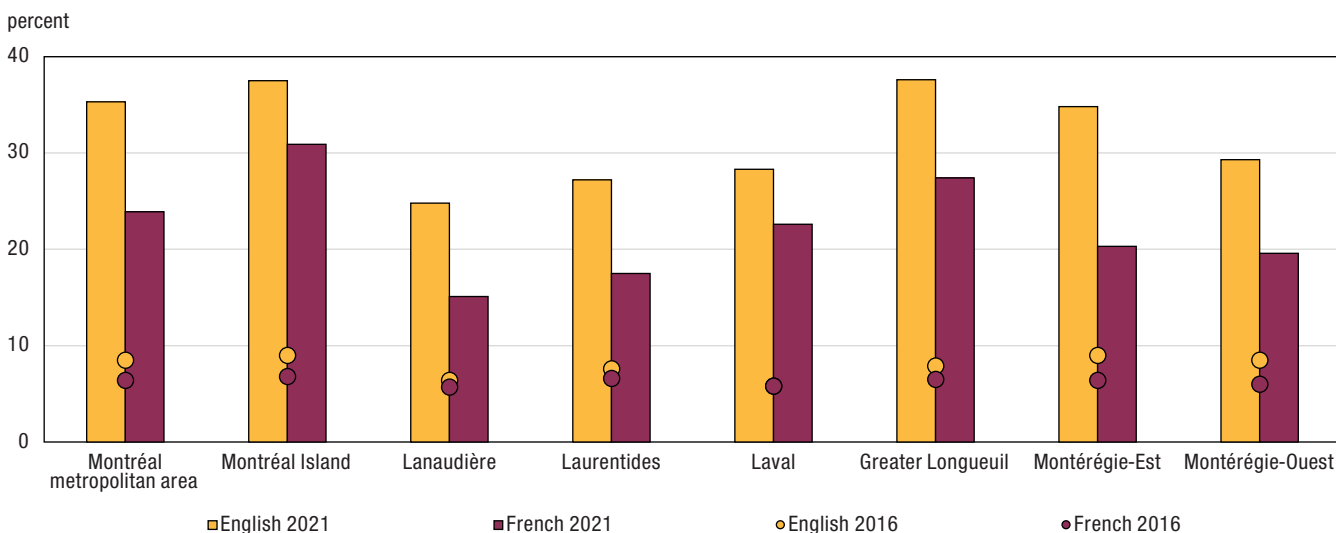
From 2016 to 2021, there was a significant increase in working from home in the entire Montréal metropolitan area (25.8% of workers in 2021, up 19.1 percentage points since 2016). The increase was observed among both English speakers (+26.8 percentage points) and French speakers (+17.5 percentage points), and it was widespread in every subregion compared to the proportion observed in 2016.

Among residents of the Montréal metropolitan area, English speakers (35.3%) were more likely than French speakers (23.9%) to work from home. The proportion of those working from home varied considerably by subregion, but was consistently higher among English speakers. In addition, the proportion of people working from home was higher among English speakers than among French speakers in almost every borough, neighbourhood, municipality and regional county municipality in the Montréal metropolitan area.

It should be noted that while the proportions of people working from home were relatively similar across the subregions in 2016 (and low—between 5.7% and 9.0%) among both English- and French-speaking workers, the situation was much more heterogeneous in 2021. Residents of Montréal Island and Greater Longueuil were most likely to work mainly from home, while residents of Lanaudière or the Laurentides were less likely (Chart 1).

**Chart 1**

**Proportion of workers who were mainly working from home, by language spoken predominantly at home and place of residence, 2016 and 2021**



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016 and 2021.

### In 2021, both short and long commutes were less common among both French and English speakers

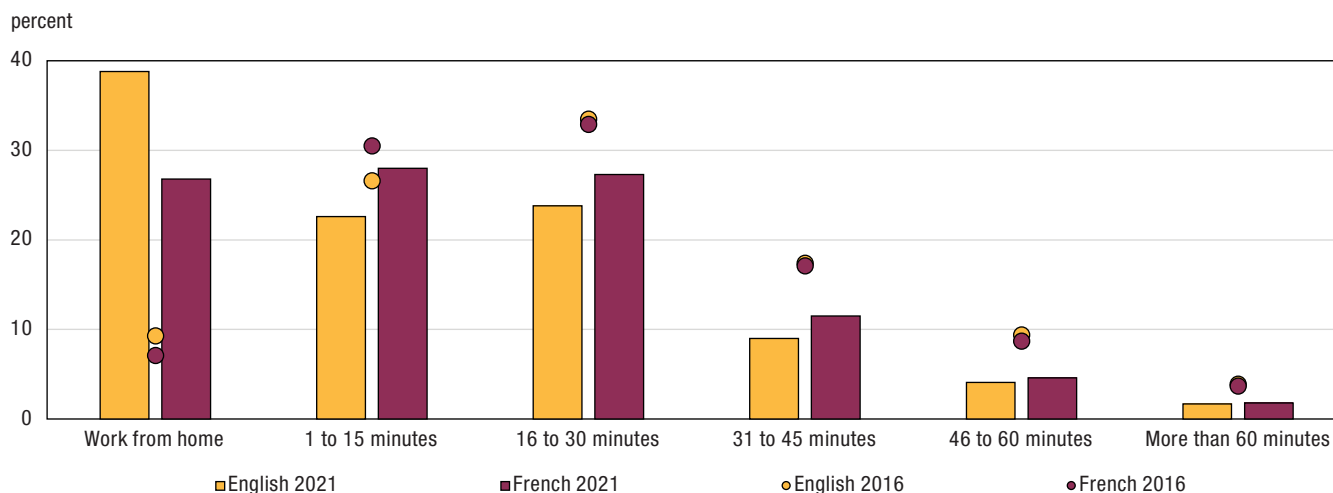
An analysis of commute times shows a widespread decrease in both short and long commutes among French- and English-speaking workers. However, the commute times of these groups of workers differ.

French-speaking workers were more likely than their English-speaking counterparts to make short commutes in 2021 (28% of those with a fixed workplace had commutes of 1 to 15 minutes, compared with 23% of English-speaking workers). In fact, French-speaking workers were more likely to have short commutes in 2016. In contrast, for commutes of 45 minutes or longer, French- and English-speaking workers had similar proportions.

The higher proportion of English speakers working from home and short commutes being more common among French workers contributed to the proportion of French-speaking workers with a commute of 30 minutes or less being almost identical to the proportion of English-speaking workers.



**Chart 2**  
**Distribution of workers with a fixed workplace, by commuting time and language spoken predominantly at home, 2016 and 2021**



**Note:** Only workers with a fixed workplace or those who were working from home are presented here; the commuting time of workers with no fixed workplace was not determined.  
**Source:** Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016 and 2021.

The proportion of people working from home was higher in the central neighbourhoods. In 2021, more than 4 in 10 workers in Plateau-Mont-Royal, Westmount, Ville-Marie, Outremont, and Sud-Ouest worked from home. For these workers, the commute time saved by working from home was not very significant, especially if their employer was also located in these central neighbourhoods. In fact, the vast majority of workers who live in these neighbourhoods and who had a fixed workplace outside their home only made short trips.

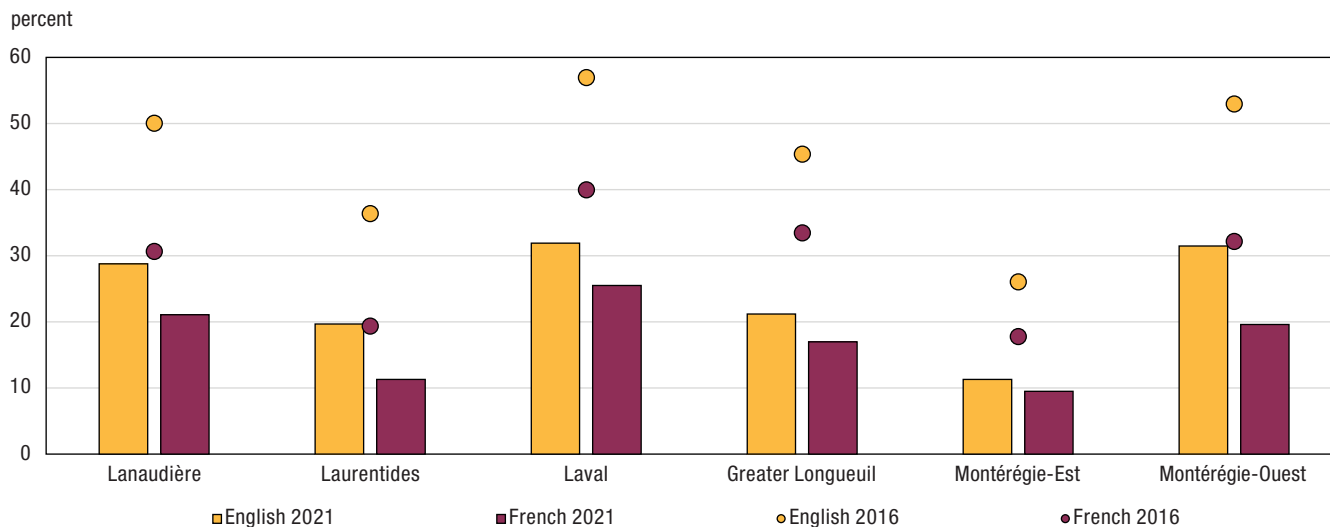
### The proportion of workers who commute to a fixed workplace on Montréal Island fell sharply

The proportion of workers who lived in the Montréal metropolitan area, worked on Montréal Island and did not work from home fell sharply from 52.3% in 2016 to 35.0% in 2021. In absolute terms, this represents a decrease of 320,000 workers. Conversely, the total number of workers in the region increased.

Among those who did not live on Montréal Island, 19.3% of workers had a fixed workplace outside of their home on Montréal Island, a decrease of more than 10 percentage points among both French-speaking workers (from 28.2% in 2016 to 16.8% in 2021) and English-speaking workers (from 50.1% in 2016 to 27.8% in 2021).

The fact remains that many more English-speaking workers than French-speaking workers commute to Montréal Island, although the gap narrowed, particularly among residents of Montérégie-Est. In 2021, Montréal Island was the main workplace for roughly 30% of English-speaking workers in Laval, Montérégie-Ouest and Lanaudière, compared with at least half in 2016 (Chart 3).

**Chart 3**  
**Proportion of workers who commuted to a fixed workplace on Montréal Island, by language spoken predominantly at home and place of residence, 2016 and 2021**



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016 and 2021.

Other flows of workers between subregions (from Laurentides and Lanaudière to Laval, and from Montérégie-Est and Montérégie-Ouest to Greater Longueuil) that had been relatively common in 2016 also decreased in 2021, among both French- and English-speaking workers.

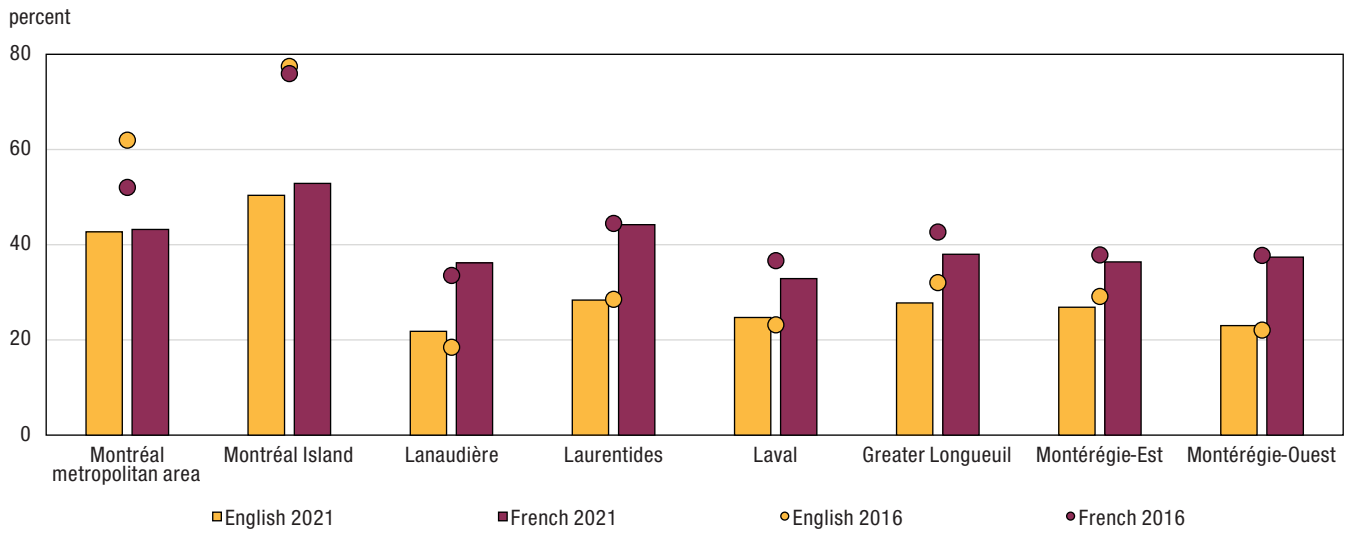
### The proportion of workers in the suburbs with a fixed workplace in their subregion of residence remained relatively stable

While working from home increased significantly and commuting to a fixed workplace on Montréal Island or between subregions of the suburbs decreased significantly from 2016 to 2021, the proportion of workers who commuted to a fixed workplace in their subregion of residence remained relatively stable among both English- and French-speaking workers, in most subregions in the suburbs.

In 2021, in all subregions, the subregion of residence of French-speaking workers was also their main subregion of work. This was also true in 2016, with the exception of Laval residents, who were more likely to be employed on Montréal Island (40.0%) than in Laval (36.7%).

Moreover, all things being equal, the results of the study suggest that for suburb residents, working from home did not mostly replace working in the subregion of residence, but did replace commutes from the suburbs to Montréal Island.

**Chart 4**  
**Proportion of workers with a fixed workplace in their subregion of residence, by language spoken predominantly at home and place of residence, 2016 and 2021**

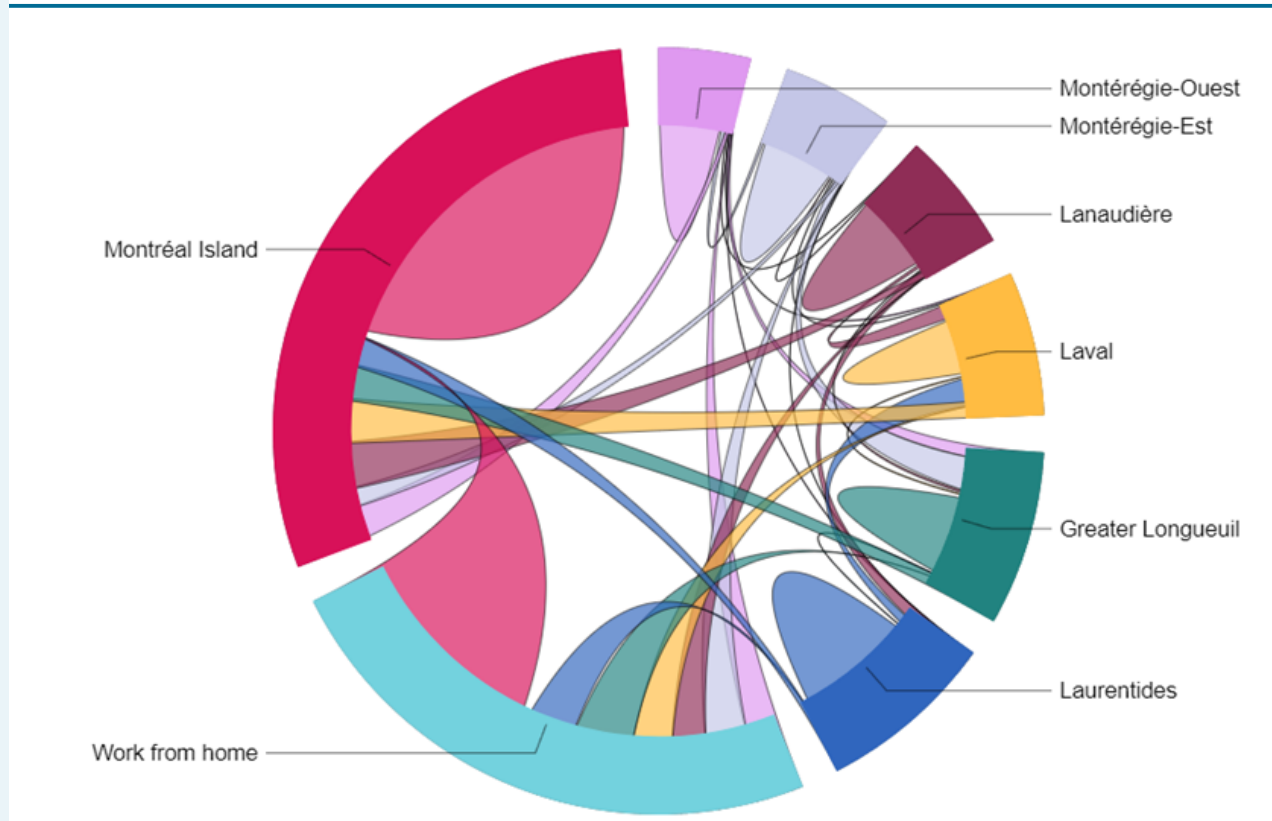


Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016 and 2021.

## Place of work by place of residence and language profile illustrated

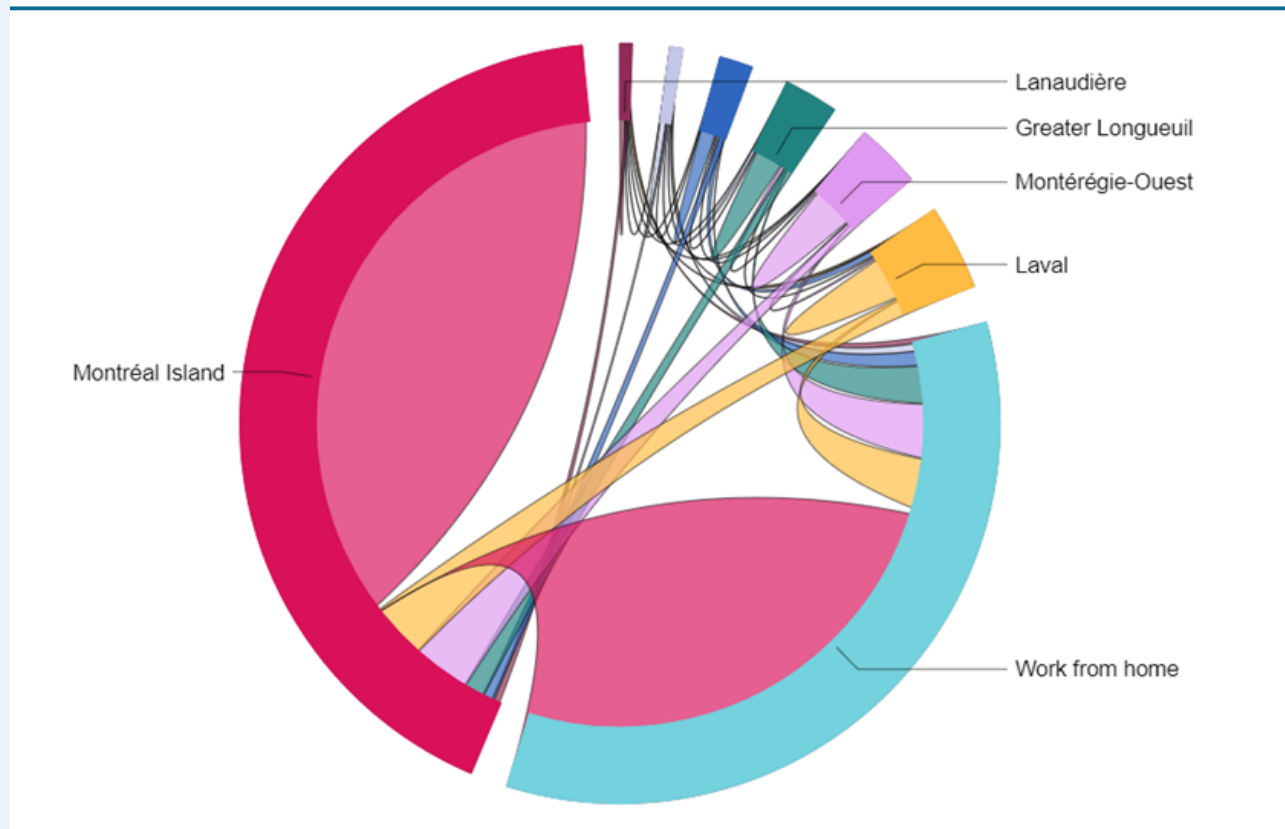
Figures 1 and 2 illustrate commuting flows between each subregion in the Montréal metropolitan area and the proportion of workers who worked primarily from home. Beyond working from home and commuting to Montréal Island, it was found that English speakers were much less likely than French speakers to have a fixed workplace in the suburbs or to commute between subregions in the suburbs. For example, relatively few English speakers who worked in Greater Longueuil lived in another subregion, while the flow of French-speaking workers between Montérégie-Est and Greater Longueuil was bigger. Finally, the flow of English-speaking workers from Laval or Montérégie-Ouest to Montréal Island was relatively greater than that of French-speaking workers.

**Figure 1**  
**Place of work of French-speaking workers with a fixed workplace in the Montréal area or who were working from home, by place of residence, 2021**



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

**Figure 2**  
**Place of work of English-speaking workers with a fixed workplace in the Montréal area or who were working from home, by place of residence, 2021**



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

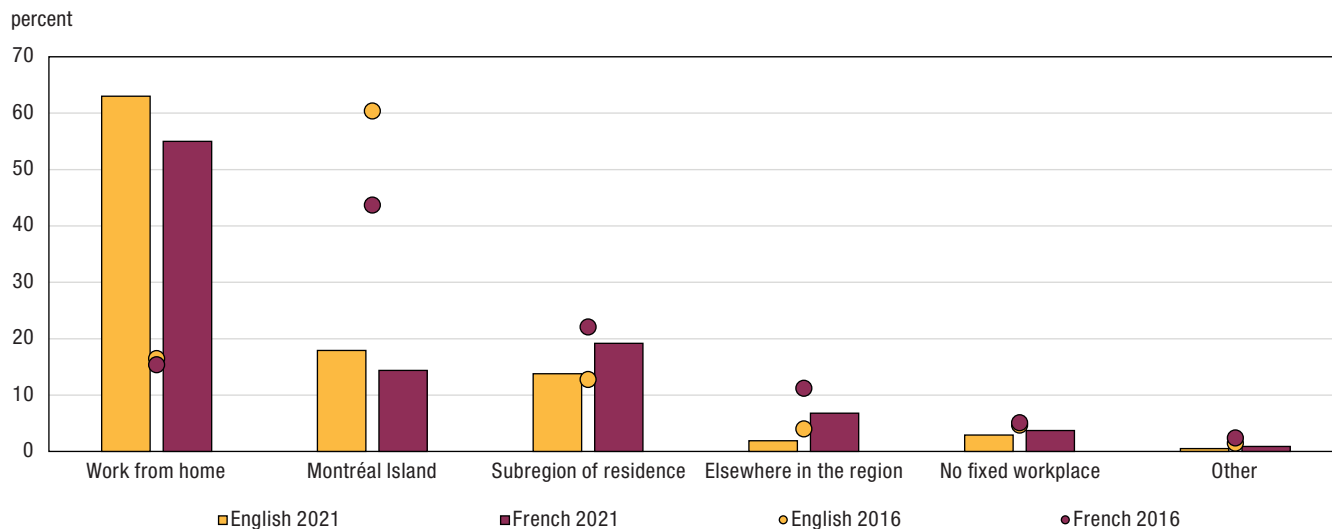
### Working from home was more common in industry sectors where English-speaking workers are overrepresented

In 2021, 6 in 10 workers in professional, scientific and technical services and in finance and insurance worked from home—sectors in which this work mode was by far most common. In contrast, in finance and insurance, working from home was rare in 2016 (7.7% of workers in the sector). Among residents of the suburbs who worked in these two sectors, there was a sharp decline in commuting to a workplace on Montréal Island and a corresponding increase in working from home (Chart 5). The proportion of workers in these sectors who did not work from home or from a fixed location on Montréal Island remained virtually unchanged, regardless of language profile.

These sectors are conducive to remote work, given their greater dependence on telecommunications and the use of remotely accessible networks. Moreover, professional, scientific and technical services and finance and insurance are among the sectors with the highest proportion of English-speaking workers in the Montréal area (21.4% of English-speaking workers compared with 16.8% for all sectors).

In both sectors, working from home was especially common among residents of Montréal Island and Greater Longueuil, in particular among English-speaking workers living in these areas.

**Chart 5**  
**Distribution of workers in the professional, scientific and technical services sector and the finance and insurance sector who live off island, by language spoken predominantly at home, 2016 and 2021**

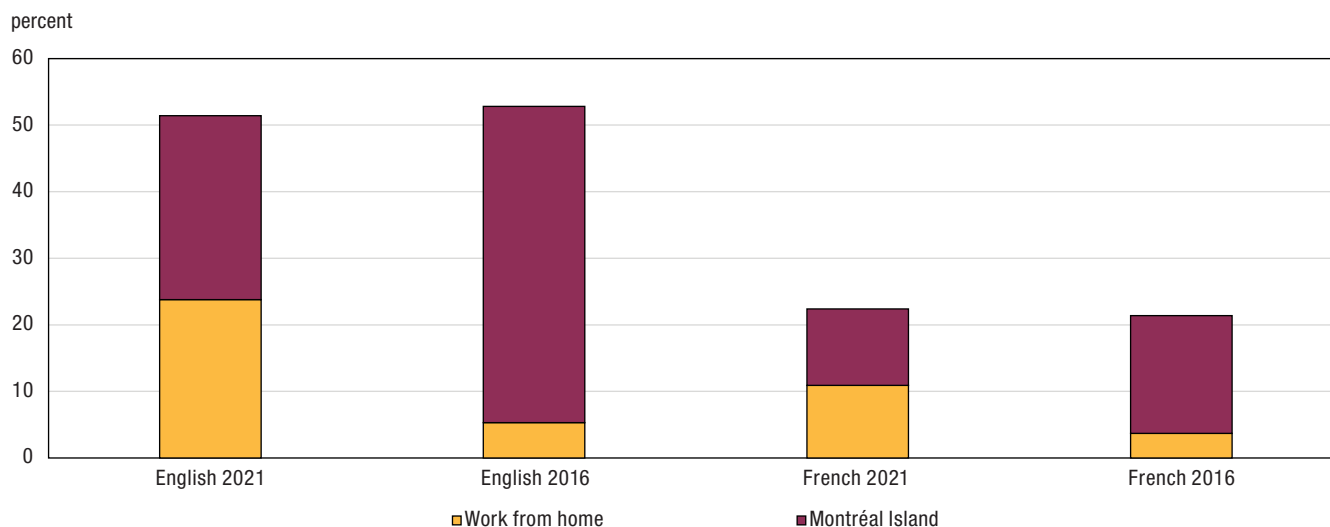


Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016 and 2021.

### In the trade sector, working from home seems to have replaced commuting to Montréal Island for workers in the suburbs

In wholesale and retail trade—the sector with the largest number of English-speaking workers in the Montréal metropolitan area—the proportion of people working from home in 2016 was low (4.1%) and then rose sharply to almost a quarter of English-speaking workers (24.9%) and an eighth of French-speaking workers (11.8%) in 2021. The highest proportion of people working from home was observed in wholesale trade, as retail trade generally does not lend itself to this type of work. In the trade sector as a whole, the proportion of English-speaking workers was relatively high in wholesale trade, while the proportion of French-speaking workers was relatively high in retail trade. This contributes to the higher proportion of English speakers in the trade sector working from home than their French-speaking counterparts.

Among both English and French speakers, the proportion of workers living in the suburbs and working in each of the subregions in the suburbs remained relatively stable. The increase in the proportion of people who worked from home is almost equal to the decrease in the proportion of workers who commuted to a workplace on Montréal Island. This change is similar to the one observed in the local labour market as a whole, except it is even greater in the trade sector.

**Chart 6****Proportion of workers in the trade sector who were living in the suburbs and working from home or commuting to Montréal Island, by language spoken predominantly at home, 2016 and 2021**

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016 and 2021.

### What about the languages spoken at work in the Montréal metropolitan area?

In the Montréal metropolitan area, the proportion of workers who used French as their primary language at work remained virtually unchanged from 2016 to 2021 (70%). Given the increase in the number of workers living and working in the Montréal metropolitan area, this corresponds to an increase of over 60,000 people who primarily used French at work in the region.

However, among all workers who commuted to a fixed workplace in the Montréal metropolitan area, there was an increase in the use of French as the main language at work, at the expense of a combination of English and French. This is probably—at least in part—due to the change in wording of the question on the languages used at work in the 2016 and 2021 censuses. For more information, please see [Speaking of work: Languages of work across Canada \(statcan.gc.ca\)](#) on the Statistics Canada website.

The use of French as the main work language was lower among those who worked at home (56.3%) than among all workers in the metropolitan area. This finding is the same regardless of the language profile of workers and their place of residence. Although working from home was less common in 2016, the same general observation holds true. A recent study provides an in-depth examination of this issue for the Montréal, Moncton and Ottawa–Gatineau metropolitan areas.<sup>8</sup>

8. [What is the connection between working from home and the languages used at work? \(statcan.gc.ca\)](#)

## Conclusion

Although more prevalent in May 2021 than in the spring of 2024, at the time of writing, working from home was a work mode used by a large number of Canadians and workers in the Montréal area. The complex and changing linguistic dynamics of the Quebec metropolis are of interest, as are the dynamics of commuting flows.

This report presents disaggregated results on these topics to identify the impact of public health restrictions and technological advances on work organization, and how the specific circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic affected workers based on their language profile. It shows that workers in the Montréal area have specific characteristics based on their language profile and that their preferences or behaviours on the labour market are not homogeneous.

A sharp increase in working from home from 2016 to 2021 was observed, particularly among English-speaking workers, who were already more likely to be working from home in 2016. Working from home is very common on Montréal Island, particularly in central neighbourhoods, and generally more likely among English-speaking workers. Moreover, there was a decline in commuting from the suburbs to Montréal Island, which is also common among English-speaking workers.

While the results suggest that working from home replaced commuting to Montréal Island for many workers in the suburbs, the data in this study do not help us determine to what extent the option of working from home prompted some to move from Montréal Island to the suburbs, or whether working from home became possible after they moved. Similarly, if workers in the suburbs have the option of working from home for an employer based on Montréal Island, it is also possible for workers living outside the Montréal metropolitan area, a population not included in this study.

In some cases, the nature of the work is more conducive to working from home. Both the finance and insurance and the professional, scientific and technical services sectors seem to lend themselves very well to working from home and they are more likely to be located in central neighbourhoods on Montréal Island. These sectors also have the highest proportion of English-speaking workers.

While the distance between home and the workplace as well as the nature of the work shed light on the dynamics of working from home in the Montréal area, they do not fully explain the reasons behind these trends.

More generally, while this study examines working from home by language profile, we could ask the following question: “Does working from home affect the languages spoken at home?” More in-depth research could provide a better understanding of the dynamics of this in the Montréal area and in Canada as a whole. Similarly, an even more disaggregated analysis by borough and municipality could provide more details about the commuting patterns of workers. However, this type of analysis, which is possible with the census data used in this study, is beyond the scope of this report. Finally, in light of the trends observed, it would be relevant to analyze the impact of working from home on the languages spoken in the public sphere, including in the neighbourhoods that were the main destinations of workers.