



COVID-19 pandemic: People unable to converse in English or French

by Nicolas Bastien and Étienne Lemyre

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COVID-19 pandemic: People unable to converse in English or French

by **Nicolas Bastien** and **Étienne Lemyre**

In light of the current COVID-19 pandemic, it is essential that public health authorities be able to share information with the public. However, there are people who cannot understand this information because they don't know English or French. Most of them can probably rely on relatives, family members or friends to help them during the pandemic but, due to physical distancing restrictions, many may have limited access to those who can help them interpret the information provided by the public health authorities.

In 2016, **649,000 people, or 1.9% of the Canadian population, reported being unable to conduct a conversation in English or French.** High levels of immigration since the 2016 Census may have contributed to a higher number of people who don't know English or French at the moment.

In 2016, close to three-quarters lived in Ontario (50.4%) or British Columbia (23.7%) (Table 1). **Most of the people who could not conduct a conversation in English or French were older adults** (40.1% were 65 years or older) or preschool children (aged 0 to 4: 15.3%). Moreover, women were overrepresented (59.0%) among this population.

Table 1
Population knowing neither English nor French, by province or territory, 2016

Province	Population		Breakdown by province	
	number	percent	number	percent
Newfoundland and Labrador	815	0.1		
Prince Edward Island	1,250	0.2		
Nova Scotia	2,730	0.4		
New Brunswick	2,370	0.4		
Quebec	75,060	11.6		
Ontario	326,935	50.4		
Manitoba	16,285	2.5		
Saskatchewan	7,945	1.2		
Alberta	59,280	9.1		
British Columbia	153,905	23.7		
Yukon	140	0.0		
Northwest Territories	195	0.0		
Nunavut	2,045	0.3		
Total	648,955	100.0		

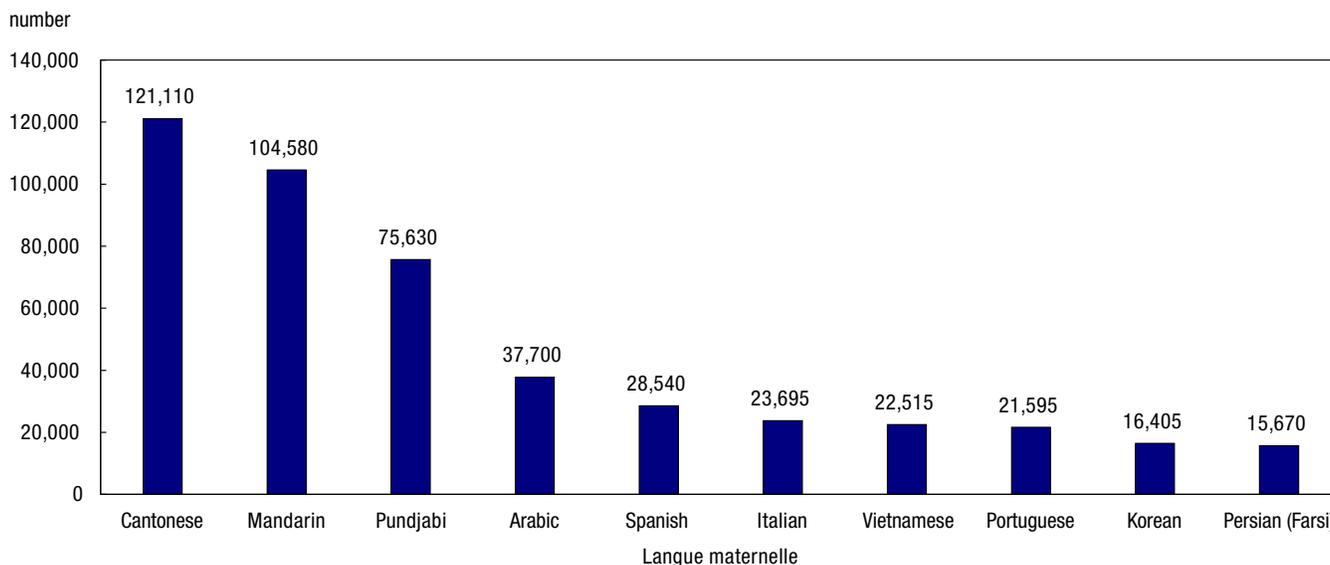
Source: Statistics Canada. Census of population, 2016. Table 98-400-X2016054.

The main mother tongues of these individuals were Cantonese, Mandarin, Punjabi, Arabic, Spanish, Italian, Vietnamese, Portuguese, Korean and Persian (Farsi) (Chart 1). Of the people who reported being unable to conduct a conversation in English or French, 37.5% had a Chinese language as their mother tongue.



Chart 1

Main mother tongues of persons who know neither English nor French, Canada, 2016

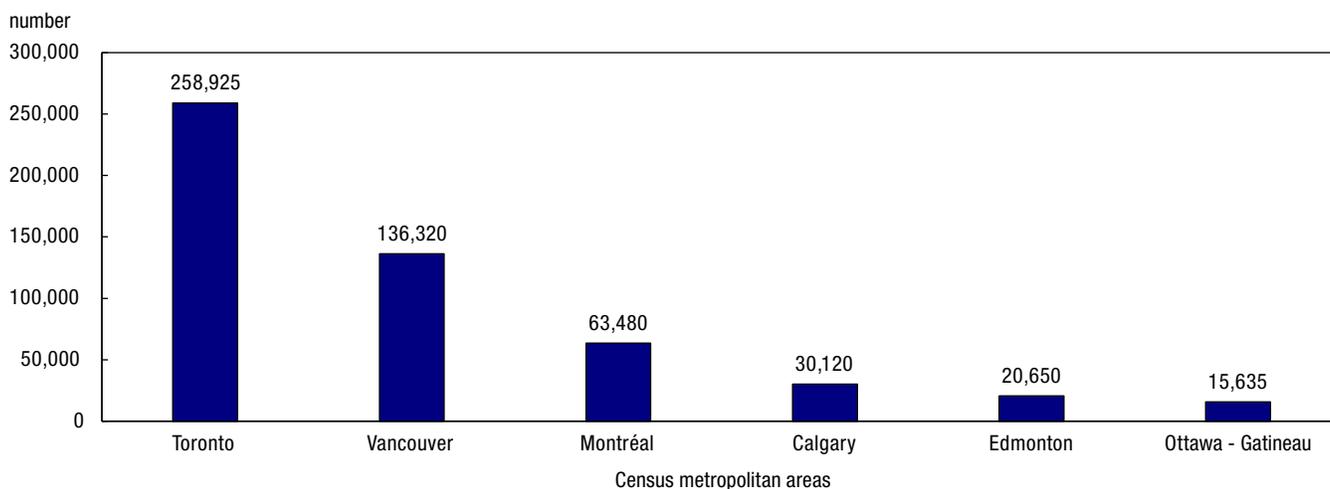


Source: Statistics Canada. Census of population, 2016. Table 98-400-X2016054.

In 2016, the population with no knowledge of English or French was primarily found in large cities. **There were six census metropolitan areas (CMAs) with at least 15,000 people who knew neither official language** (Chart 2). Of these, the Vancouver (5.6%) and Toronto (4.4%) CMAs had relatively high shares of people in this situation.

Chart 2

Census metropolitan areas with the largest populations of persons who know neither English nor French, 2016



Source: Statistics Canada. Census of population, 2016. Table 98-400-X2016057.



In the Toronto CMA in 2016, the number of people who knew neither English nor French was somewhat higher in the municipality of Markham, in the northern part of Scarborough (Scarborough–Agincourt and Scarborough North wards), and in Chinatown (Spadina–Fort York and University–Rosedale wards) (Map 1). In several census tracts in these areas, people who could not conduct a conversation in English or French made up over 15% of the total population.

In the Vancouver CMA, this population was higher in the municipalities of Richmond and Surrey and in East Vancouver neighbourhoods (Hastings-Sunrise, Kensington-Cedar Cottage, Renfrew-Collingwood, Victoria-Fraserview and Killarney).

In the Montréal CMA, they lived mainly in the Villeray–Saint-Michel–Parc-Extension borough and in the Chinatown area of the Ville-Marie borough.

Most people who reported being unable to conduct a conversation in English or French lived in a household where at least one member spoke at least one of Canada's two official languages. However, in 2016, **over a quarter of this population, or nearly 175,000 people, lived in a private household where no one aged 15 years or older could conduct a conversation in English or French.** These people may be particularly vulnerable in a pandemic if they are unable to understand the information provided by the public health authorities.

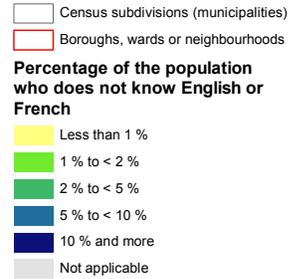
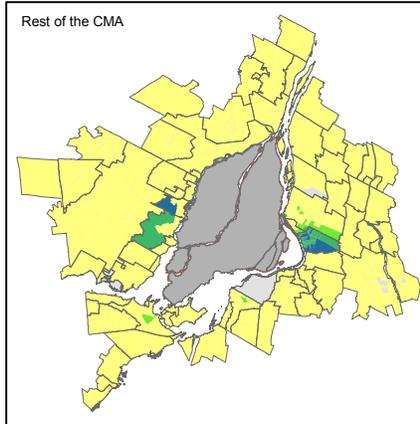
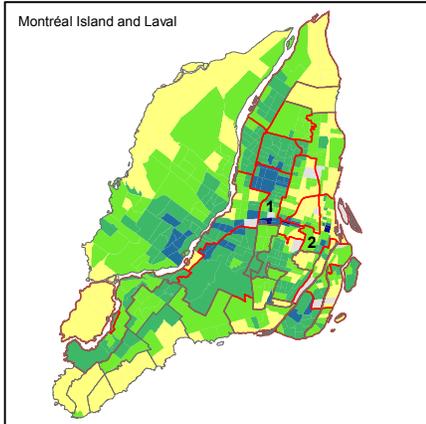
In 2016, 88,000 households in Canada were in this situation, and there were children under 18 years of age in 17.0% of those households. However, three-quarters of these households were made up of women living alone (34.3%), couples without children (30.2%), or men living alone (11.5%). In more than half of these households (56.0%), all occupants were aged 65 years or older.



Map 1

Proportion of the population who know neither English nor French, by census tract, Montréal, Toronto and Vancouver CMAs, 2016

Montréal census metropolitan area (CMA)

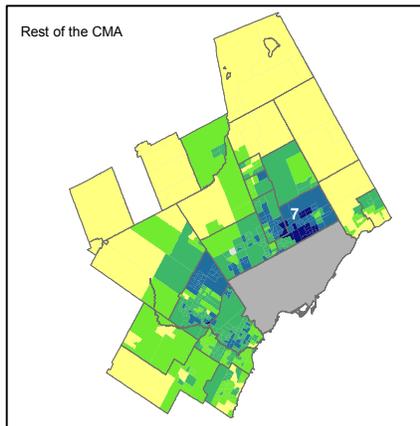
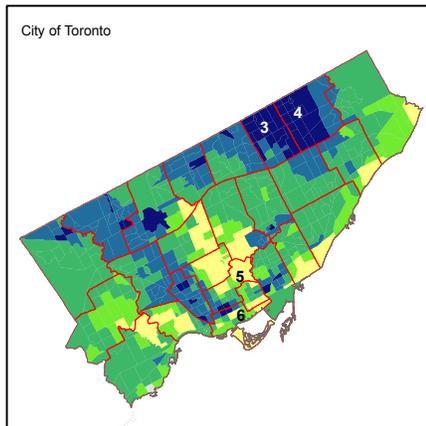


Montréal CMA
 1. Villeray-St-Michel-Parc Extension
 2. Ville-Marie

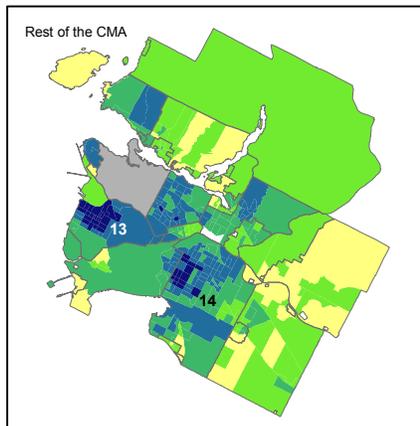
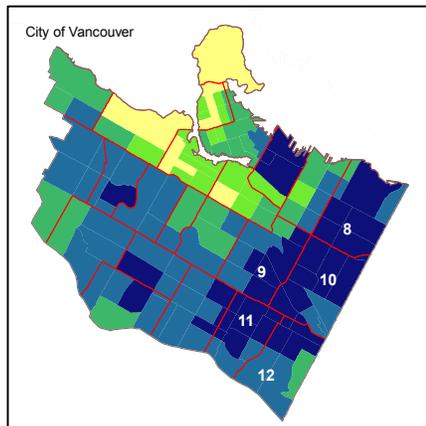
Toronto CMA
 3. Scarborough-Agincourt
 4. Scarborough North
 5. University-Rosedale
 6. Spadina-Fort York
 7. Markham

Vancouver CMA
 8. Hastings-Sunrise
 9. Kensington-Cedar Cottage
 10. Renfrew-Collingwood
 11. Victoria-Fraserview
 12. Killarney
 13. Richmond
 14. Surrey

Toronto census metropolitan area (CMA)



Vancouver census metropolitan area (CMA)



Source: Statistics Canada. 2016 Census of population, table 98-400-X2016057.



Data sources

The data in this article are taken from 100% 2016 Census data. The data on people are from tables [98400X2016054](#) and [98400X2016057](#). Household data cover private households, excluding those enumerated abroad, where no one aged 15 years or older can conduct a conversation in English or French.

References

Additional data tables on the people who cannot conduct a conversation in English or French can be found on this page: [2016 Census data tables – language](#).

Additional information on people who cannot conduct a conversation in English or French can also be found in [Immigration and language in Canada, 2011 and 2016](#). This document presents a broad statistical portrait of immigrants using certain language characteristics as well as the main countries of birth, for each province and territory and the six largest CMAs.