

Poverty and Social Exclusion in Quebec- Quebec’s English-speaking Communities

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Home / Briefs / Poverty and Social Exclusion in Quebec- Quebec’s English-speaking Communities

The *Community Health and Social Services Network* (CHSSN) submits the following brief in the interest of contributing to the development of the fourth generation of measures to be included in the government Action Plan to improve the situation of individuals and families living in poverty and social exclusion in Quebec.

English-language Communities among the Many Faces of Quebec Poverty

According to the most recent Census of Canada, the English-speaking communities of Quebec have grown to include a substantial 1,253,580 Quebecers representing 14.9% of its citizenry, but there is not always strength in numbers. Economic inequalities and regional disparities continue to be challenges faced by the provincial and regional organizations and networks promoting the interests and well-being of Quebec’s minority English-language population. “Minority” in the present context bears no resemblance to a wealthy and cohesive elite secure in its capacity to care for its own. It refers to a diverse group with a long history in Quebec characterized by markedly growing numbers of poor and vulnerable challenged in their efforts to mobilize on their own behalf.

Persistent Low Socio-economic Status and Social Exclusion

According to standard indicators for socio-economic status (SES), a key social determinant of health, the now long-standing situation of vulnerable individuals and families among English-speaking communities persists.

Low income

According to the 2021 Census, 269,805 of Quebec’s English speakers (15+) live on an annual income of less than \$20,000. This represents **25.7%** of this population which is a much higher proportion of low-income earners than observed in the French-speaking majority (**19.9%**) sharing the same territory. The proportion of high earners (\$50, 000 +) in the English-speaking population (34.1%) is lower than that found in Quebec’s French-speaking population (38.5%).

Table of Contents

- English-language
 - > Communities among the Many Faces of Quebec Poverty
 - Persistent Low Socio-economic Status and Social Exclusion
 - Intergenerational Decline in Levels of Social Integration and Sense of Belonging
 - > High levels of CEPE vulnerable groups
 - > Recommendation

Precarious employment

According the 2023 report of the *Provincial Employment Roundtable* (PERT), English speakers are more likely to work in a temporary position, work fewer average weeks, and are more likely to work part-time compared to French speakers. These are all lead indicators for labour market precarity.

Living below LICO (low income cut-off)

The 2021 Census tells us that 12.1% of Quebec’s English-language population is living below LICO compared to 7.1% of Francophones. The greatest gap between minority and majority language populations in terms of this measure of poverty is evident in the 15-24 years age group – a life stage typically characterized by completion of education and entry to the job market. Among English-speakers aged 15-24, 19.4% are living below LICO compared to 9.1% of French-speakers of the same age. This means that English speakers in this age group are twice as likely as their Francophone counterparts to be living below LICO.

When observed by region (RTS territory), the proportion of the English-speaking population living in poverty in Centre-Sud-de-l’Île-de-Montréal is as high as 21.7% and 21.2% in Centre-Ouest-de-l’Île-de-Montréal. English speakers in the Capitale-Nationale and Chaudière-Appalaches regions are more than twice as likely as their French- speaking neighbours to be struggling to meet their basic needs.

For both the minority and majority language group living in Quebec, the tendency to live below the low-income cut-off declined between 2016 and 2021. However, the relative gap between Anglophones and Francophones in terms of the tendency to live in poverty has grown. In 2016, 18% of English speakers were living below LICO compared to 12% of French speakers. In 2021, 12% of English speakers were in this position compared to only 7% of French speakers. This means that, in relative terms, that the gap is larger.

Unemployment

According to the Census of Canada, the unemployment rate for English-speaking Quebec rose from 8.9% in 2016 to 10.9% in 2021. For Francophones, their unemployment was constant at 6.9% for both 2016 and 2021. This means that the gap in unemployment rates doubled from 2% to 4% over the 2016-2021 period. The 2021 unemployment rate for English speakers is higher in every Quebec region than that displayed by Francophones.

Looking at the 25-44 age group who correspond to the younger half of the working age population, we see that the gap between Anglophones and Francophones has increased. In 2016, English speakers in this age cohort had a rate of 8.5% while for French speakers it was 5.7%. In 2021, it is 9.8% among English speakers aged 25-44 and 5.2% among French speakers in this age cohort. No doubt, in 2023 this inequality is impacting the health and well-being of the young families and children that CHSSN, and their networks, are working with. Clearly, this younger half of the English- speaking population is not faring as well as their seniors were at the same age.

Intergenerational Decline in Levels of Social Integration and Sense of Belonging

English-speaking youth and young parents today are more likely than the youth of yesterday to face long-term economic disadvantage. The past tendency of Quebec’s minority English-language communities to report higher educational levels than the majority has all but disappeared among the younger age cohorts. The effects of persistent economic inequalities are no doubt evident in probes like the *Canadian Community Health Survey* which reveals that “*English-speaking youth (15-24) score low on many mental and emotional health indicators compared to other age groups within their language community and compared to*

Francophones of the same age...males score lower than females on many indicators". These include low scores on indicators for social integration, sense of belonging, emotional attachment, high levels of stress and anxiety, low-self-esteem and low scores on feeling skills and competencies are recognized.

Language barriers and socio-economic factors are key considerations in the case of the surge in rates of anxiety and depression among Anglophones during COVID. During the pandemic, high levels of economic insecurity were met with increased job loss, the inability to meet basic security needs and heightened fear stemming from uncertain future job prospects. The impact of the health crisis persists today and will be felt long into the future. Dr. Melissa Généreux, professor at the Faculty of Medicine and Health Services at the Université de Sherbrooke and advisor to the Direction de santé publique, reports that consistently, across regions, there are social groups that are more affected by the pandemic than others. These at-risk groups are adults aged 18-24, Anglophones and health care workers. In the words of Dr. Généreux, "In our study, 37% of adults aged 18-24 reported symptoms of anxiety or depression in the previous two weeks. It is concerning that a significant portion of young people are not doing well. It is equally striking that Anglophones are twice as likely as Francophones to have anxiety or depressive symptoms."

Low socio-economic status tends to manifest in greater risk for a variety of health problems and a lower likelihood of being able to meet any costs associated with medical treatment. Notably, mental health support, especially support in English, that comes at a price is beyond the reach of many at-risk Anglophones. They depend upon public health and social services wherein the low rate of English-speaking health professionals is problematic. According to a 2023 CROP/CHSSN province-wide survey of 4,318 English speakers, a significant percentage of English-speakers are not able to access service in English. For example, 33% of survey respondents were not served in English at a CLSC; 32% were not served in English by Info Santé or Info Social ;27% were not served in English at a hospital emergency room or out-patient clinic;19% were not served in English at the hospital when they stayed overnight; 18% were not served in English by the doctor they saw at a private office or clinic and 16% were not served in English by a health professional for a mental health problem.

High levels of CEPE vulnerable groups

Groulx, for *Centre d'étude sur la pauvreté et l'exclusion*, points out that new immigrants and people with physical limitations, like the frail elderly, are among the groups that are vulnerable to the persistence of low income and social exclusion. Both these groups form a markedly substantial portion of Quebec's English-speaking communities.

A substantial one third (33.6%) of Quebec's English speakers are immigrants. These levels are much higher than the levels found among Quebec's French-speaking majority where immigrants represent 8.8% of the population. Immigrants, especially newcomers, frequently face a variety of linguistic and cultural barriers in accessing Quebec's health and social service system.

In the Montreal region, noted for its high level of ethno-cultural diversity, visible minority English speakers living below the low-income cut-off represent an alarming 37.7% of the English-speaking visible minority group.

According to the latest Census, in Quebec there are 24,845 English-speaking seniors (65+) living below the low-income cutoff. They represent 13.5% of the English-speaking senior population. The proportion of Quebec's French-speaking seniors in this same predicament is 9.2%. Among all age groups, the lowest level of English/French bilingualism is among those 65+.

Recommendation

The evidence-base drawn from the 2021 Census of Canada and analysed in accordance with the definitions and priorities of the *Centre d'étude sur la pauvreté et l'exclusion (CEPE)* underscores the importance of recognizing language as a

factor when identifying socio-economic inequalities in Quebec. The CHSSN recommends that the English-speaking communities of Quebec be made visible among the many faces of Quebec poverty.

The English-speaking communities of Quebec represent a substantial 15% of its population and are notably prominent among Quebec’s most vulnerable citizens. Any process of planning and implementation of action to combat poverty must recognize the struggle of the individuals and families who reside in these communities to maintain economic self-sufficiency and to integrate as full citizens of Quebec society. Efforts to prevent the causes and reduce the impact of poverty must be cognizant of the fact that these vary among Quebec’s population in accordance with unique factors like region, language and age. When the specific characteristics and context of the target population – the poor and socially excluded – are overlooked, the process to prevent poverty risks promoting its persistence. The CHSSN recommends that the specificity of the poverty and accompanying social exclusion of English-speaking communities be made an issue in the fourth Action Plan of the Government of Quebec. It is hoped that this would be a step toward remedying the evident under-representation of these communities among the current government program offerings intended to support Quebec’s economically and socially disadvantaged.

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