

DEMOGRAPHIC DECLINE OF ENGLISH SPEAKERS IN CERTAIN REGIONS OF QUEBEC

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How is English faring in Quebec? While 2021 census data reflect a recent increase in English usage in the Montreal and Gatineau areas, a more complex portrait emerges when examining other parts of Quebec and longer time periods. The 20th century was marked by a decline in the proportion of English speakers in most Quebec regions. The trend has shifted in the past 20 years, yet a notable decline continues in parts of coastal Quebec, the Eastern Townships, and Rouyn-Noranda.

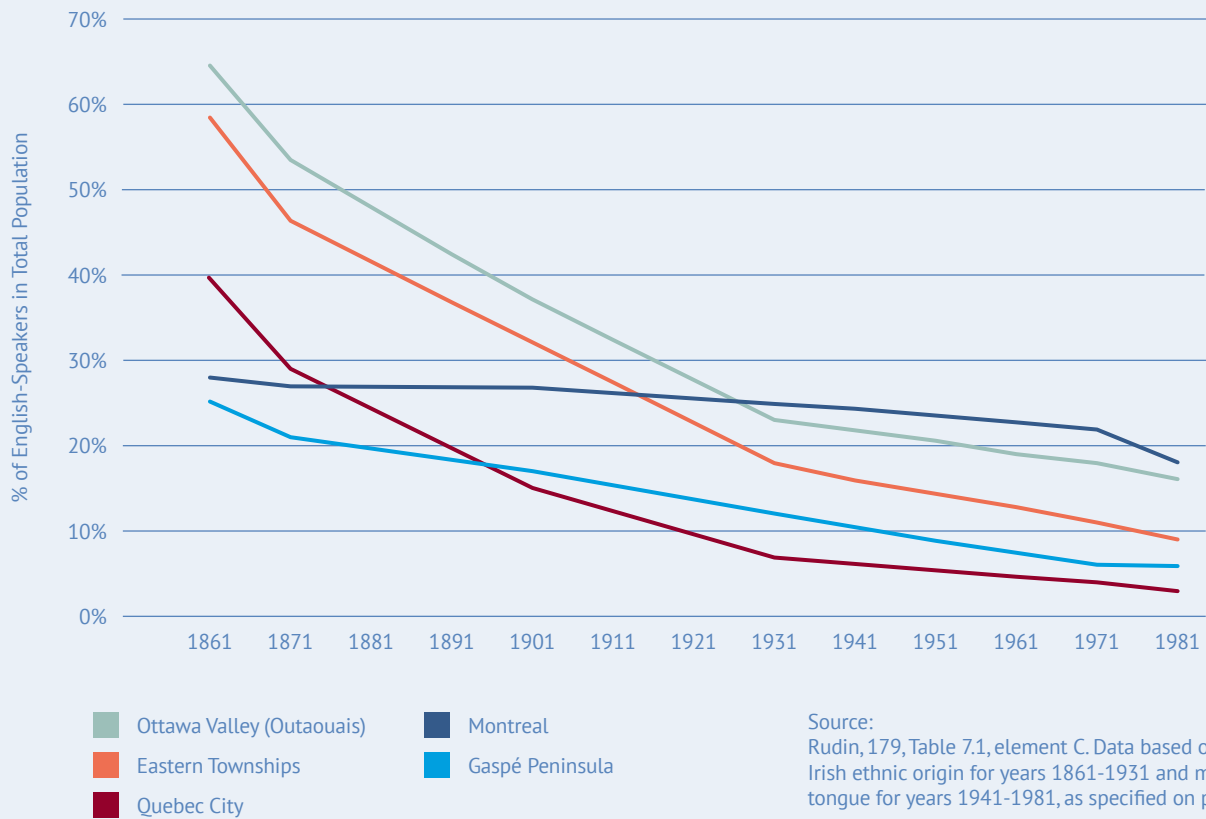
This brief looks at regions experiencing a decline in their English-speaking populations, and considers the forces driving recent changes.

Historical Context

From the 1870s to the 1970s, various economic and political factors drove people away from the regions outside Montreal to that city, the rest of Canada, and New England,¹ a trend which had repercussions on the linguistic make-up of Quebec (see Figure 1). Factors included the decline of the shipbuilding and timber trades in Quebec City and changes in the coastal economy. However, the greatest proportional decline during this period was in the Eastern Townships; **in 1861, English speakers made up the majority there, but by the 1980s they comprised only 9% of the regional population.**

¹ Ronald Rudin, *The Forgotten Quebecers: A History of English-Speaking Quebec, 1759-1980* (Quebec: Institut québécois de recherche sur la culture, 1985), 180-198.

Figure 1:
Estimated Decline in the proportion of English Speakers in Selected Regions: 1861-1981



Source:
 Rudin, 179, Table 7.1, element C. Data based on British/Irish ethnic origin for years 1861-1931 and mother tongue for years 1941-1981, as specified on p. 26-27.

The 1970s saw a noticeable exodus of English speakers from the province as a whole, propelled by economic shifts favouring Toronto, as well as political changes in Quebec. Language laws promoting French as the common public language of Quebec prompted many English speakers to leave. **A total of 198,274 mother tongue English speakers left between 1971 and 1986. Those who stayed were more likely to be bilingual and to participate in Francophone Quebec culture.**²

Since the mid-1980s, the proportion of first official language spoken (FOLS) English speakers in Quebec has gone slightly down followed by a slight increase since 2006, but it has not gone back up to 1971 levels.³ Projections based on the 2011 census show a slight increase in coming years for the province as a whole.⁴ However, the narrative changes when zooming in on certain regions.

² John Dickinson and Brian Young, *A Short History of Quebec*, 3rd edition (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008), 311; Patrick Donovan, "English-Speaking Quebecers," in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 2019, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/english-speaking-quebecer>.

³ Statistics Canada, "Table 15-10-0032-01 Population by first official language spoken and geography, 1971 to 2021," 2024, <https://doi.org/10.25318/1510003201-eng>.

⁴ Given the recent increase in temporary migrants with English as their FOLS, which was not considered in 2011, revised projections would likely show a greater increase in English speakers than what had been projected in 2011. Statistics Canada, "Language Projections for Canada, 2011 to 2036," 2017.

Coastal Quebec: Gaspé Peninsula, Magdalen Islands + Lower North Shore

The coastal regions of Quebec, including the Gaspé Peninsula, the Magdalen Islands,⁵ and the Lower North Shore,⁶ have historically been home to English speakers and resource-based economies.

The county that has experienced the sharpest numerical decline of English speakers since 2001 is the regional county municipality (RCM) of Minganie-Le-Golfe-du-Saint-Laurent. It is located in the Lower North Shore part of the Côte-Nord administrative region. Its English-speaking population declined by 20%. Other significant coastal English-speaking population decreases include the Avignon RCM on the south shore of the Gaspé peninsula (-18.9%); Le Rocher-Percé RCM (-7%), which includes the towns of Chandler and Percé; La Côte-de-Gaspé RCM (-7.2%), home to the municipality of Gaspé; and the Communauté maritime des Îles-de-la-Madeleine (-6.7%). It should be noted that the French-speaking populations in the Gaspé and parts of the Lower North Shore also declined in broadly comparable percentages, but not in the Magdalen Islands.⁷

Studies have shown that population decline in rural, resource-based economies is often due to challenging economic factors that drive younger people away. This depopulation leads to a loss of community autonomy, resulting in a reduction of local services and businesses that further exacerbates its marginalization.⁸ The 1990s collapse of Atlantic codfish stocks and subsequent government moratoria created such economic and social challenges throughout coastal Quebec.⁹

In an effort to mitigate further population loss, communities in these regions shifted fishing priorities from cod to shellfish, such as crab, shrimp, and lobster, and diversified the economy by boosting tourism, biodevelopment, and agriculture. Their extended aim is to stem the outmigration of youth, who in these areas have cited a lack of job opportunities and recreational activities as reasons for leaving.¹⁰

⁵ These first two regions are known officially as the Gaspésie–Îles-de-la-Madeleine administrative region.

⁶ The Lower North Shore is the easternmost part of the Côte-Nord administrative region.

⁷ All RCM statistics from Bell and Donovan, with the help of Joanne Pocock, “English-Speaking Population Change Over Time Outside Montreal/Laval 2001-2021,” <https://www.concordia.ca/content/dam/artsci/scpa/quescren/docs/FOLS2001-2021.Upload.xlsx>

⁸ Yuheng Li, Hans Westlund, and Yansui Liu, “Why Some Rural Areas Decline While Some Others Not: An Overview of Rural Evolution in the World,” *Journal of Rural Studies* 68 (2019), 135, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2019.03.003>.

⁹ Joseph Gough, “History of Commercial Fisheries,” in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 2020, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/history-of-commercial-fisheries>.

¹⁰ Coasters Association, “A Portrait of the Territory Driving Innovation for a Stronger Future: A Depiction of the Coasters Association on the Lower North Shore, an Overview of the Region, a Breakdown of Each Community Profile and the Way Forward From Here,” 2020, 12, <https://coastersassociation.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/LNS-Portrait-VA-Digital.2.pdf>; Mary Richardson, “The Future Is Now: Towards a Community Vision for the Future of the English-Speaking Community of the Magdalen Islands” (Council for Magdalen Islanders (CAMI), 2019), 8-9, 14-15, <https://chssn.org/documents/cami-the-future-is-now-towards-a-community-vision-for-the-future-of-the-english-speaking-community-of-the-magdalen-islands/>; Mary Richardson and Mary Zettl, “Profile of English-Speaking Youth: Gaspésie-Îles-de-La-Madeleine” (CHSSN, May 2020), 5-6, <https://ckol.quescren.ca/en/lib/E75FZZF3>.

The Eastern Townships Around Sherbrooke

The English-speaking population in parts of the Eastern Townships (Estrie)¹¹ continues its slow but steady decline. Not only is that population declining, it is also aging. What is more, the English-speaking population of the region as a whole has higher rates of unemployment and low income than those of French speakers in the same territory.¹²

The numerical decline of the English-speaking population in this region between 2001 and 2021 was most significant in the RCMs immediately surrounding the city of Sherbrooke: Le Haut-Saint-Francois (-11.31%), Le Val Saint Francois (-5.7%) and Memphremagog (-7.32%).¹³ There has been no corresponding numerical decline of the French-speaking population in these RCMs.

Studies have shown that, similar to the coastal regions, some decline in this part of the Townships has been due to aging residents not being replaced by newcomers, compounded by outmigration to Montreal, Ontario, and Alberta,¹⁴ particularly of youth.¹⁵

Rouyn-Noranda

Located near Quebec's border with Ontario, Rouyn-Noranda is a mining community whose population bloomed in the first half of the 20th century with waves of European immigrants, many of whom spoke English or integrated into a sizeable local English-speaking community.¹⁶ In 1941, 45% of the population of Noranda and 14% of the population of Rouyn were English speakers.¹⁷ Since 2000, English speakers in the merged city of Rouyn-Noranda form less than 3% of the total population.¹⁸

The English-speaking population there declined by 13% between 2001 and 2021, likely as a result of a lack of population renewal. Studies show a high proportion of seniors and a low population of children under 14,¹⁹ along with a significant outmigration of university-aged youth.²⁰ Conversely, the Francophone population in Rouyn-Noranda is growing.

¹¹ Estrie is commonly called the Eastern Townships in English. The latter is a historic name, and its historical geographic area overlaps with, but is not identical to, the Estrie administrative region.

¹² Joanne Pocock, "Demographic Profiles of Québec's English-Speaking Communities: Region of Estrie and Sherbrooke," Baseline Data Report Series 2022-2023 (Community Health and Social Services Network (CHSSN), August 29, 2023), 15, 38, <https://chssn.org/documents/demographic-profiles-of-quebecs-english-speaking-communities-sherbrooke/>.

¹³ Bell and Donovan, op. cit.

¹⁴ Jan Warnke, "Mobility and Migration: The Challenge to Community Vitality in the Eastern Townships of Quebec," *Journal of Eastern Townships Studies*, no. 26 (Spring 2005), 77, https://www.etr.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/IETS_26-8-Warnke.pdf.

¹⁵ Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, "The English-Speaking Community of Eastern Townships; Produced During the Action-Research on: Vitality Indicators for Official Language Minority Communities 2: Three English-Speaking Communities in Quebec" (Ottawa, 2008), 3-4, https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2012/clo-ocol/SF31-92-2-2-2008-eng.pdf.

¹⁶ Mary Richardson, "Portrait of the English-Speaking Community of Rouyn-Noranda," March 2015, 8, <https://chssn.org/documents/portrait-of-the-english-speaking-community-of-rouyn-noranda/>.

¹⁷ Fernand Larouche, "L'immigrant dans une ville minière du Québec," Master's thesis, Université Laval, 1974, 15, <https://depositum.uqat.ca/id/eprint/371>.

¹⁸ Bell and Donovan, op. cit.

¹⁹ Joanne Pocock, "Demographic Profiles of Québec's English-Speaking Communities: Region of Abitibi-Témiscamingue and Rouyn-Noranda," Baseline Data Report Series 2022-2023 (Community Health and Social Services Network (CHSSN), August 29, 2023), 11, <https://chssn.org/documents/demographic-profiles-of-quebecs-english-speaking-communities-rouyn-noranda/>.

²⁰ Richardson, "Portrait of the English-Speaking Community of Rouyn-Noranda," 10.

However, community organizers in Rouyn-Noranda note an increase in Filipino newcomers at the local English school and Catholic church since 2021, which may be reflected in future censuses.²¹

The Draws of Cottage Country

While the COVID-19 pandemic famously inspired droves of high-earning city dwellers to escape to the suburbs and countryside, small town life had been calling to Montrealers years before. Between July 2017 and 2018, 24,000 residents left the city, an outmigration attributed to people moving to the above-mentioned areas.²²

“Cottage country” is often loosely defined as rural regions within a two-hour drive of a metropolitan area, and for Canadians, frequently near ski resorts.²³ In the area around Montreal, these hot spots can be found in the Laurentides to the northwest and Montérégie and Estrie to the south and east. **Pockets of these regions have seen declines in their English-speaking population since 2001, some numerically and others, proportionally.**

The number of English speakers in most areas of cottage country outside Montreal were not affected by recent migrations. However, the Brome-Missisquoi RCM in Estrie experienced a drop in the proportional size of its English-speaking community between 2001 and 2021 (-6.3%),²⁴ despite a marginal increase in the actual numbers (+3%). Given that it is one of the province’s most popular cottage RCMs, this proportional decline is likely due to the phenomenon mentioned above, where urban Francophone migrants to Brome-Missisquoi conceivably outnumbered the English-speaking ones. The area continues to be home to the highest proportion of English speakers in the Eastern Townships, at 17.9% of the region’s population.²⁵ The profile of this English community is in line with the rest of the region, with a higher proportion of seniors, low-income residents, people living alone, and unemployment rates compared with the French-speaking majority.²⁶

²¹ Email exchange with Sharleen Sullivan, Executive Director, Neighbours Abitibi-Témiscamingue, June, 2024.

²² Martine St-Amour, “La Migration interrégionale au Québec en 2017-2018 : Les Gains continuent d’augmenter dans les Laurentides et en Montérégie,” Coup d’oeil sociodémographique (Institut de la statistique du Québec, février 2019), 4, <https://www.quebec.ca/nouvelles/actualites/details/la-migration-interregionale-au-quebec-en-2017-2018-les-laurentides-lanaudiere-et-la-monteregie-demeurent-les-grandes-gagnantes>.

²³ Statistics Canada, “Escaping the Big City for Idyllic Small Town Life,” April 14, 2022, <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/o1/en/plus/767-escaping-big-city-idyllic-small-town-life>.

²⁴ The proportion dropped from 24.27% to 17.96%.

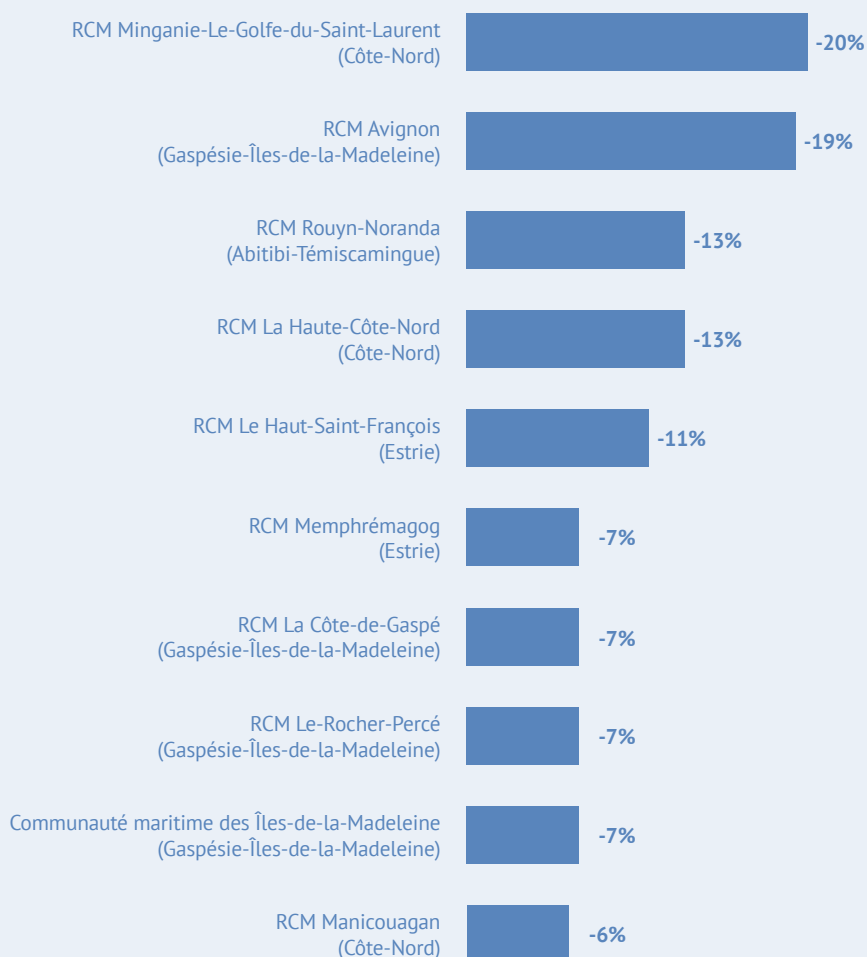
²⁵ Bell and Donovan, op. cit.; Joanne Pocock, “Demographic Profiles of Québec’s English-Speaking Communities: Region of Estrie and MRC Brome-Missisquoi,” Baseline Data Report Series 2022-2023, 2023, 10, <https://chssn.org/documents/demographic-profiles-of-quebecs-english-speaking-communities-mrc-brome-missisquoi/>.

²⁶ Pocock, “Demographic Profiles of Québec’s English-Speaking Communities: Region of Estrie and MRC Brome-Missisquoi,” 13, 15, 20, 38.

Conclusion

The English-speaking population in Quebec is no longer facing the sharp declines it faced in the century before the 1980s. Indeed, recent years have seen the number of English speakers grow overall in the province, particularly in Montreal. That said, English-speaking population numbers have declined in several once thriving communities of the province (Figure 2). **Many face aging populations, high unemployment, low income, and a lack of job opportunities, all of which are determining factors when considering the health of a society.**

Figure 2:
Top 10 RCMs Facing Numerical Decline of Their English-Speaking Populations, 2001-2021



Source:
 Bell and Donovan, op cit.

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