

Exploring the Effects of Language as a Barrier on Access to Care, Service Utilization and Well-Being Outcomes for English-Speaking Families in Quebec

A brief report prepared for the Community Health and Social Services Network (CHSSN) by the Childhood Anxiety and Regulation of Emotion (C.A.R.E) Research Group

CHSSN



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Educational and Counselling Psychology



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The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the official policies of Health Canada, nor that of all participants interviewed and the researchers.

Overview and Key Takeaways

- The majority of English speakers in Quebec, and parents to a child aged 0–8 years old, reported feeling socially awkward, uncomfortable and experiencing symptoms associated to stress and anxiety when speaking in French.
- Parents also reported feeling socially inhibited, and confused when required to speak in French to healthcare professionals.
- The qualitative interview also validated the existence of challenges navigating the healthcare system due to language barriers.
- Reported language barriers included difficulty communicating with professionals in French affecting their ability to access timely healthcare, compromised quality of patient care, and experiencing discrimination when requesting the provision of English services.
- Patients with lived experience pleaded the case that health policymakers had to act in order to ensure more equitable access to care and implement measures to better support English speakers (i.e., using AI and other technologies for booking).

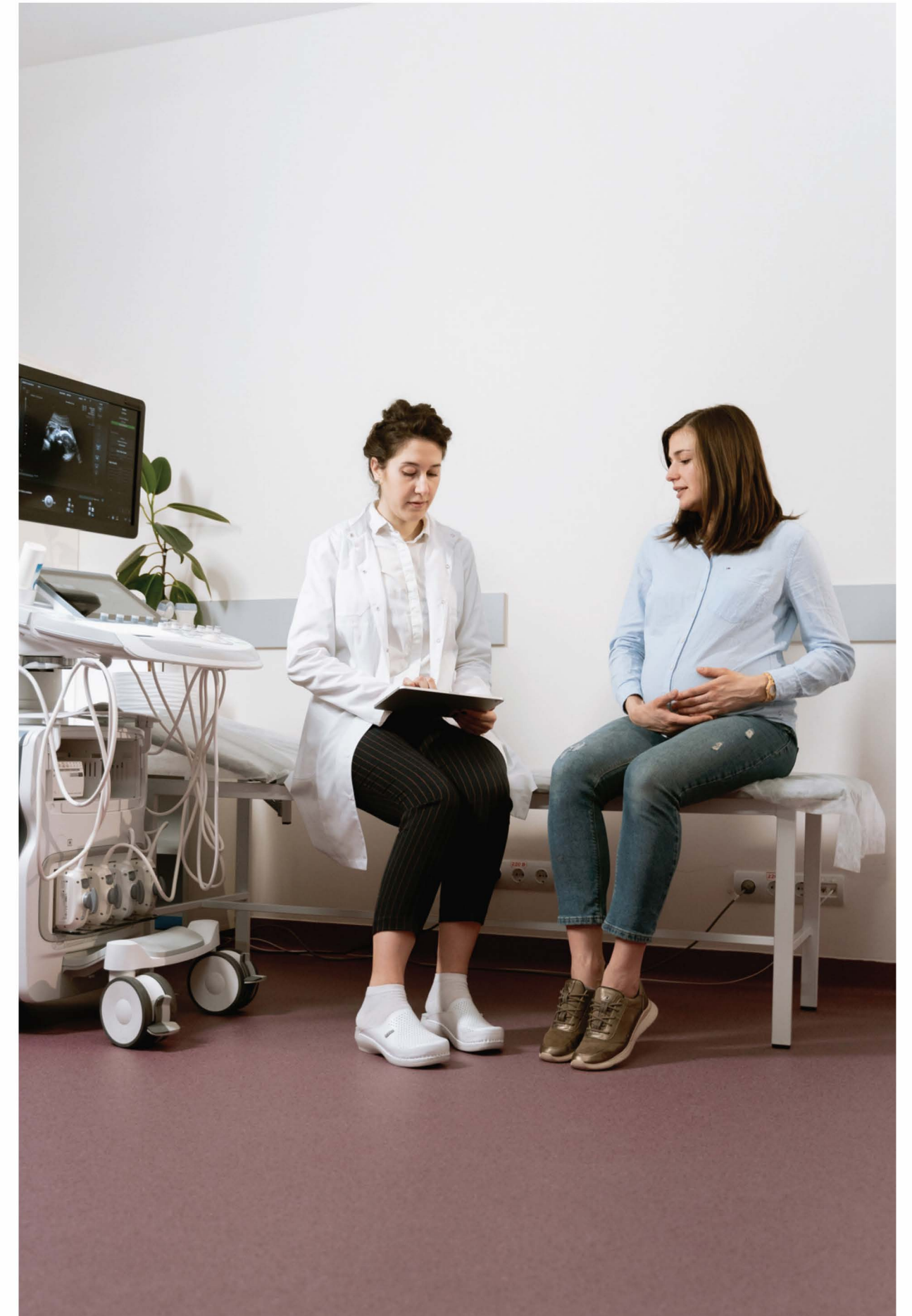


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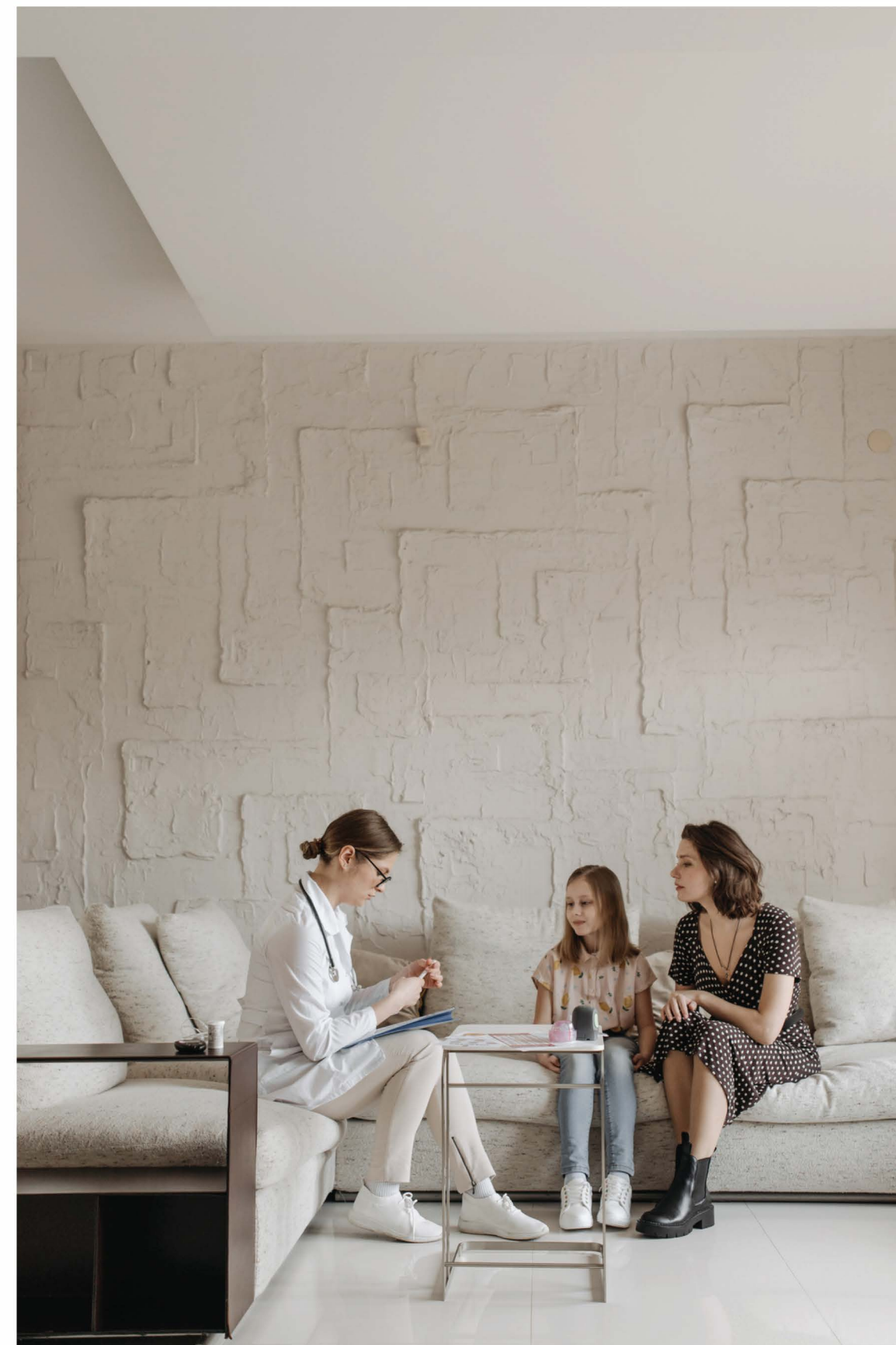


Barriers to Healthcare - What is Known

Language has been identified as a barrier to accessing and using healthcare for both Anglophones in Quebec and a multitude of other minority speakers worldwide.

Specifically, these barriers include difficulty accessing a healthcare professional, such as booking an appointment in a preferred language, lack of choice regarding treatment and services required, difficulties understanding treatment plans and test results, and lack of services in preferred language when referred to healthcare specialists.

Language barriers in accessing healthcare also suggests some significant negative implications for the mental health and well-being of children and parents who represent minority language speakers; of which included high levels of communication anxiety when seeking mental health services, lower reports of mental health issues, feelings of isolation, increased stress, and risk of suicide ideation. Relatedly, mental health practitioners reported that minority speakers experience greater difficulty accessing care in a preferred language, compromising the provision of care.



Accessing Healthcare in Quebec - The Survey

Not everyone has an equal opportunity to access nor receive the health care they require. Though scantily explored in Quebec, some individuals face barriers in accessing health care in the province because they are minority language speakers. It is thus increasingly critical to identify barriers to accessing care in an effort to improve equitable distribution of resources as well as a way to reduce known developmental disparities that impact marginalized communities. The province of Quebec like all other Canadian provinces are now home to a great number of newcomers, immigrant families, who may not be proficient in

French. Moreover, an important number of people born in Quebec identify as minority speakers within a French-speaking province, which could also impede on their ability to find a mental health care professional who can provide the services in the language they have a greater ease expressing themselves with.

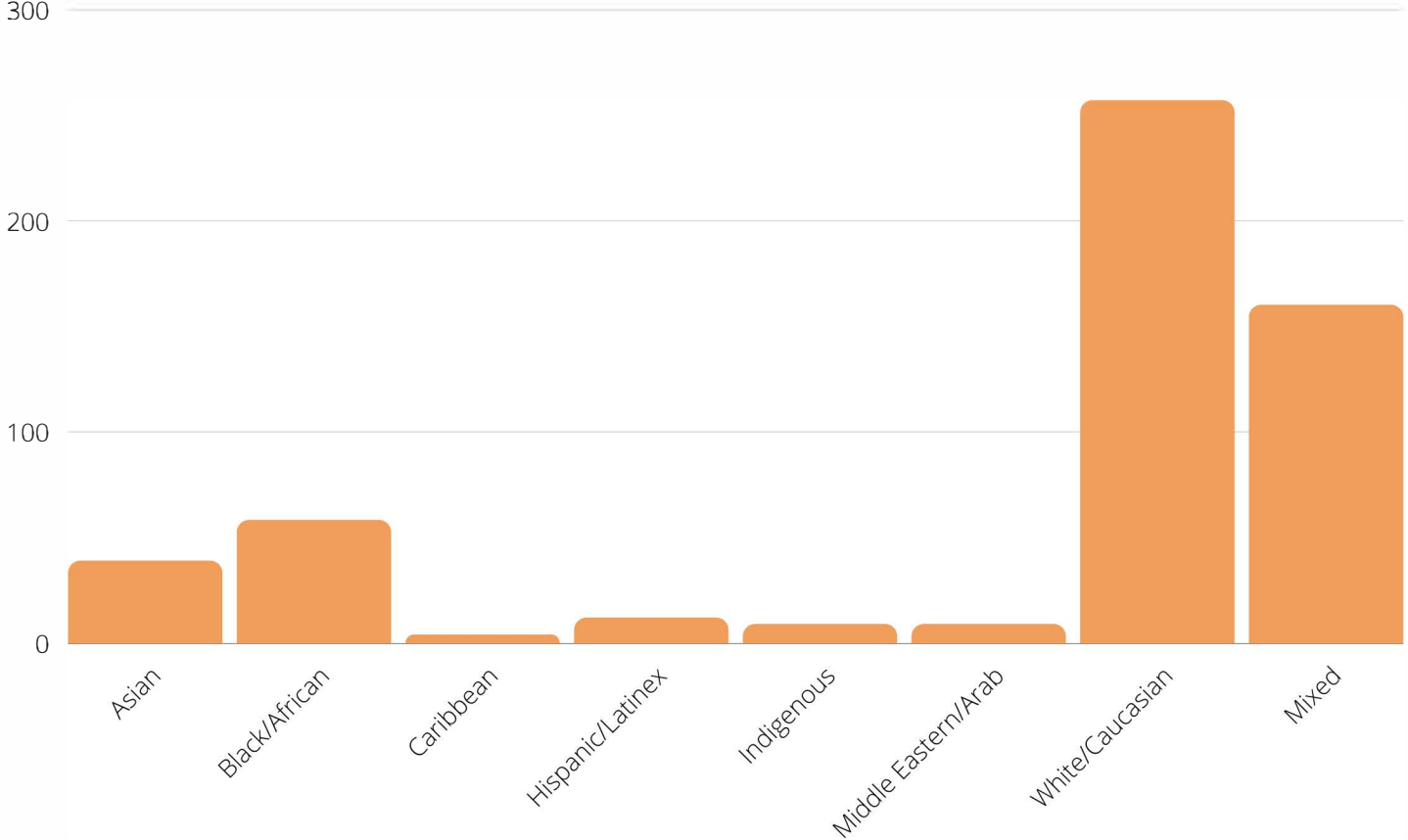
In an attempt to address this important access issue and identify solutions to overcome such challenges, this collaborative project aimed to identify barriers to accessing health care in Quebec for English speaking families of children aged 0-8.



Demographics

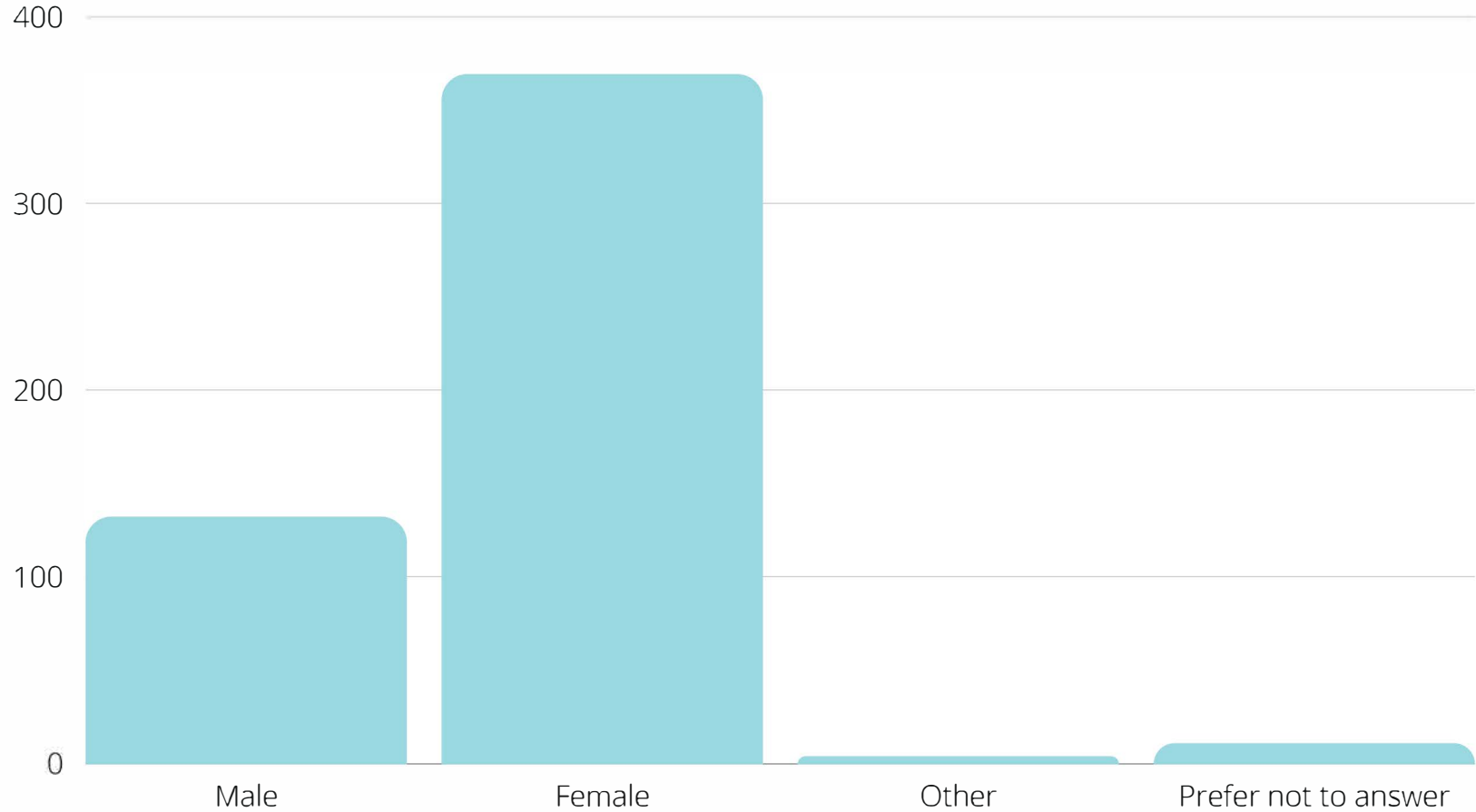
Cultural Background

48.3% of respondents identified as White/Caucasian, **31.2%** as Mixed (two or more ethnicities), **10.9%** as Black/African, **7.3%** as Asian, **2.3%** as Hispanic/Latinx, **1.7%** as Indigenous, **1.7%** as Middle Eastern/Arab, and **5%** chose not to respond.

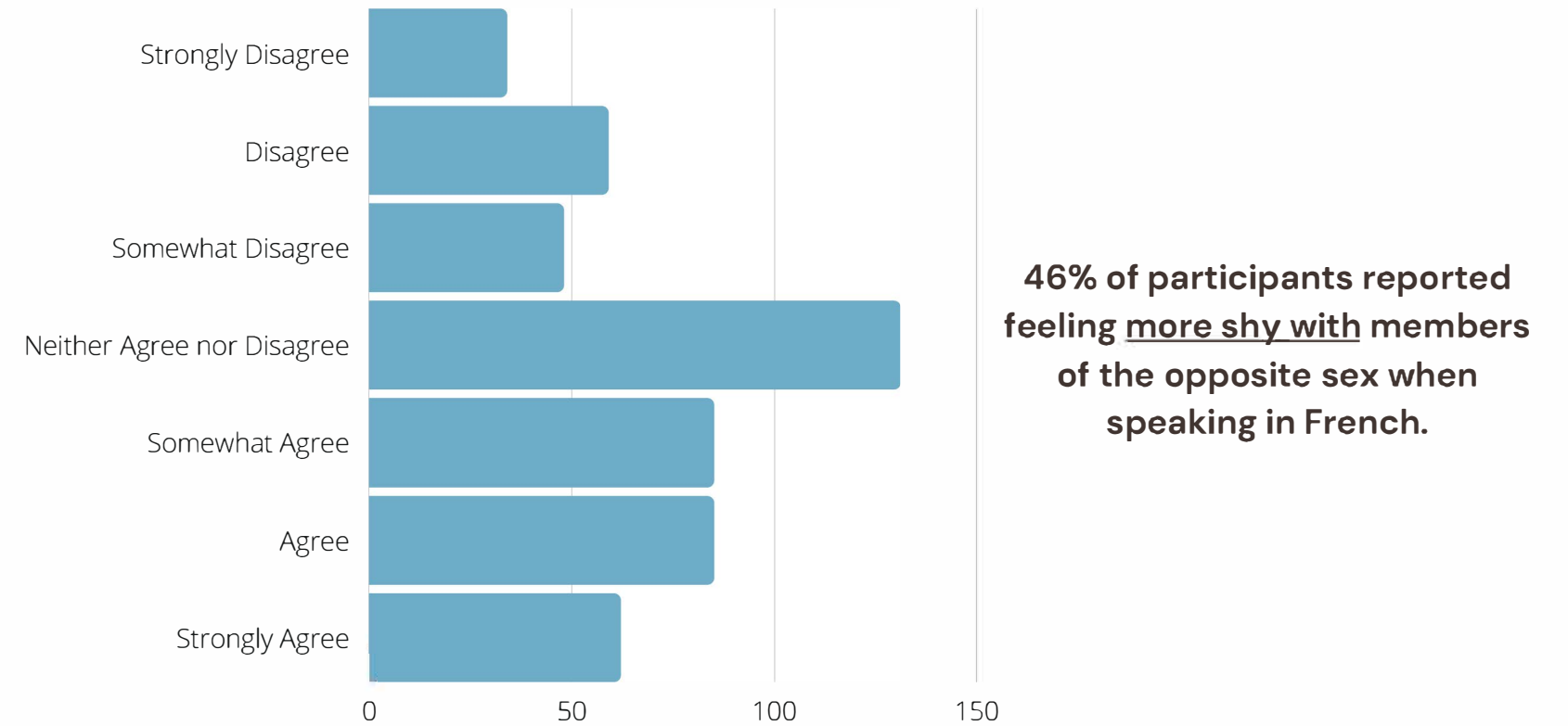
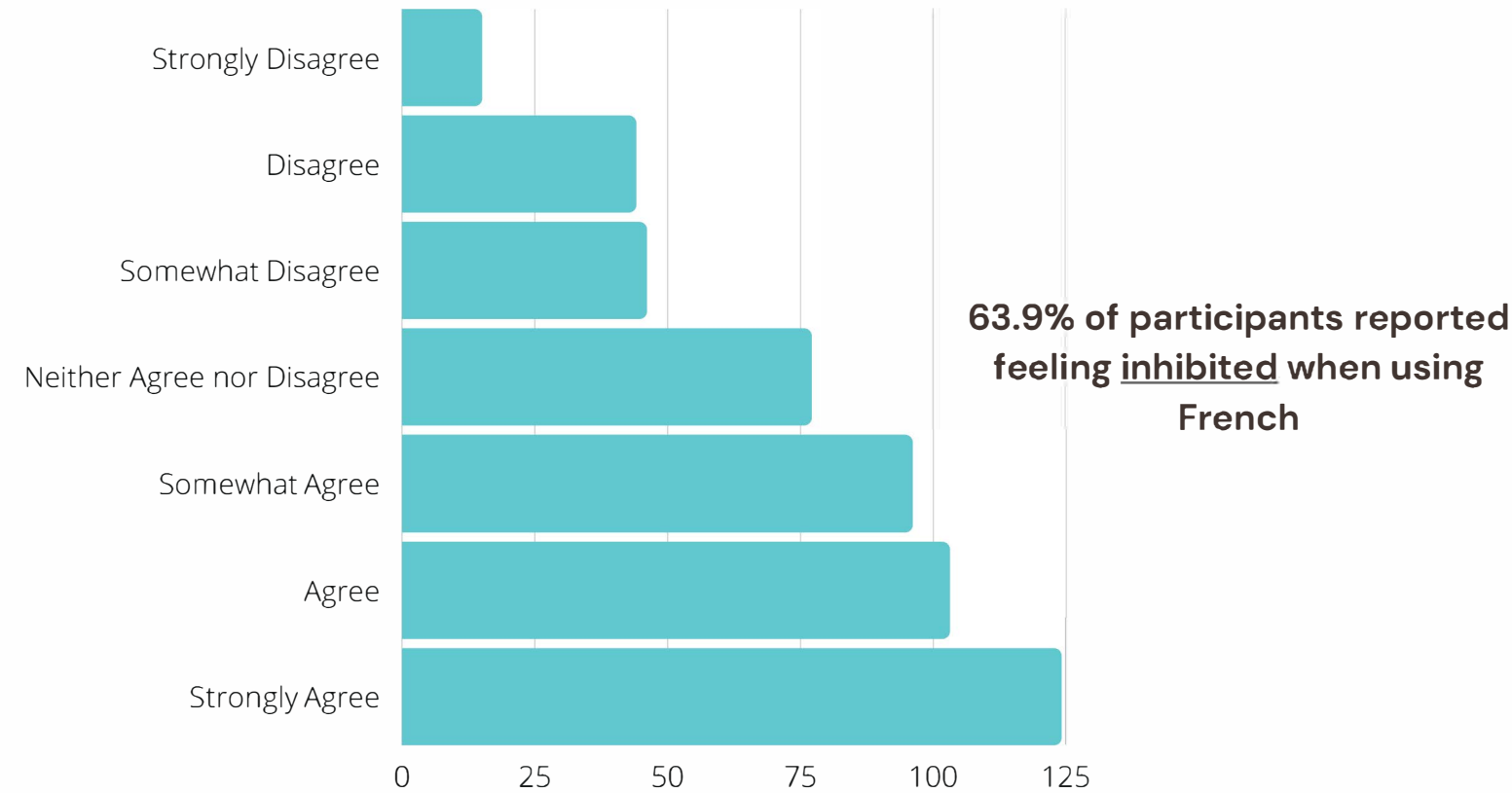
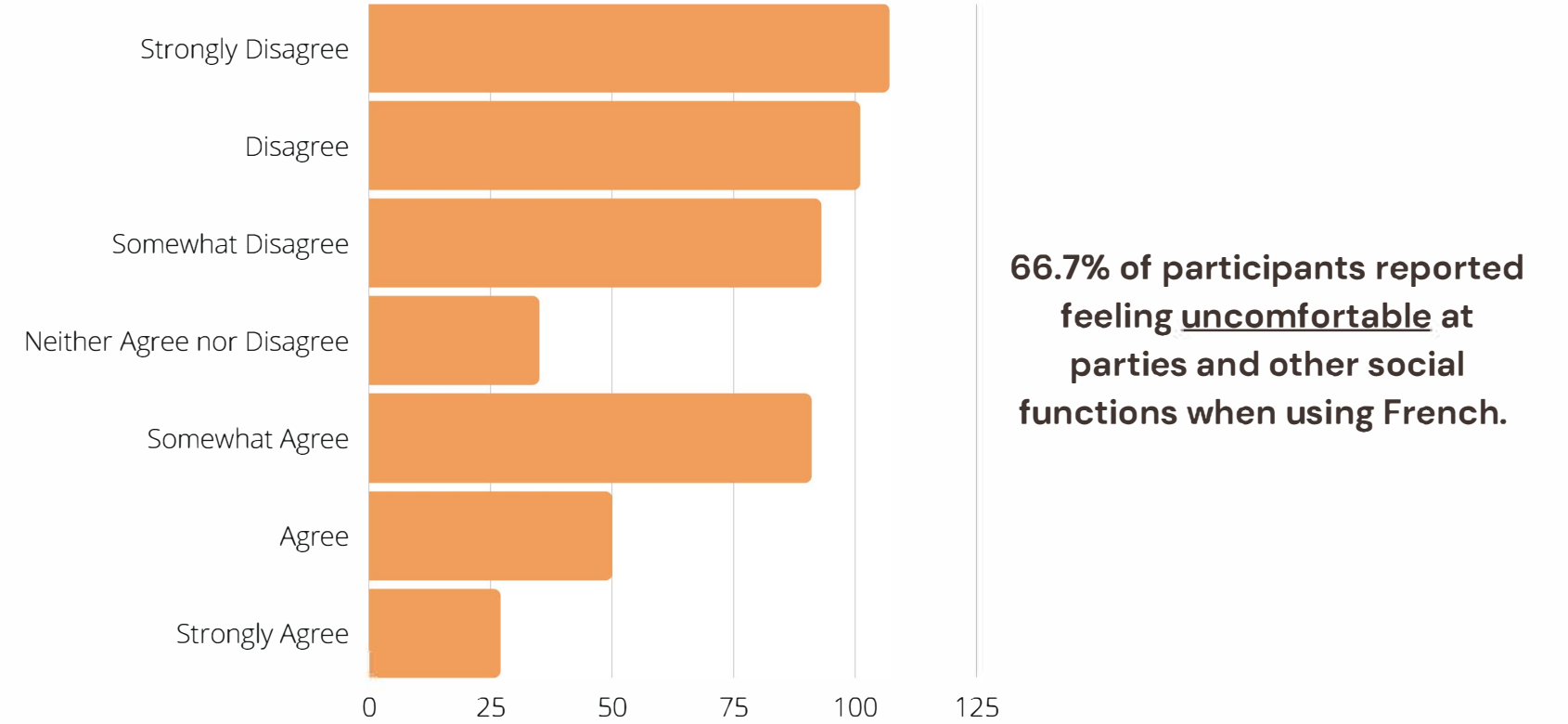
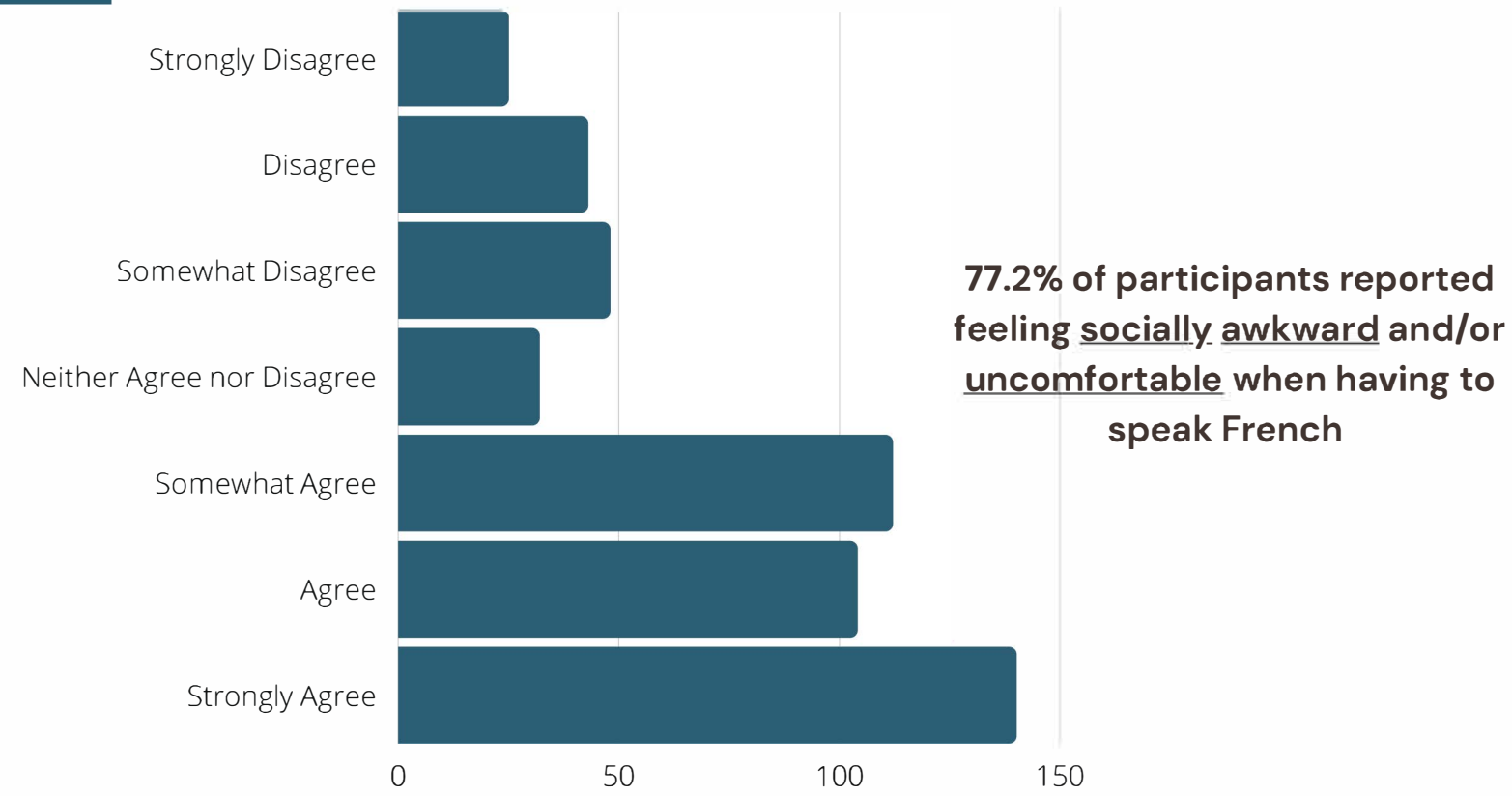


Gender

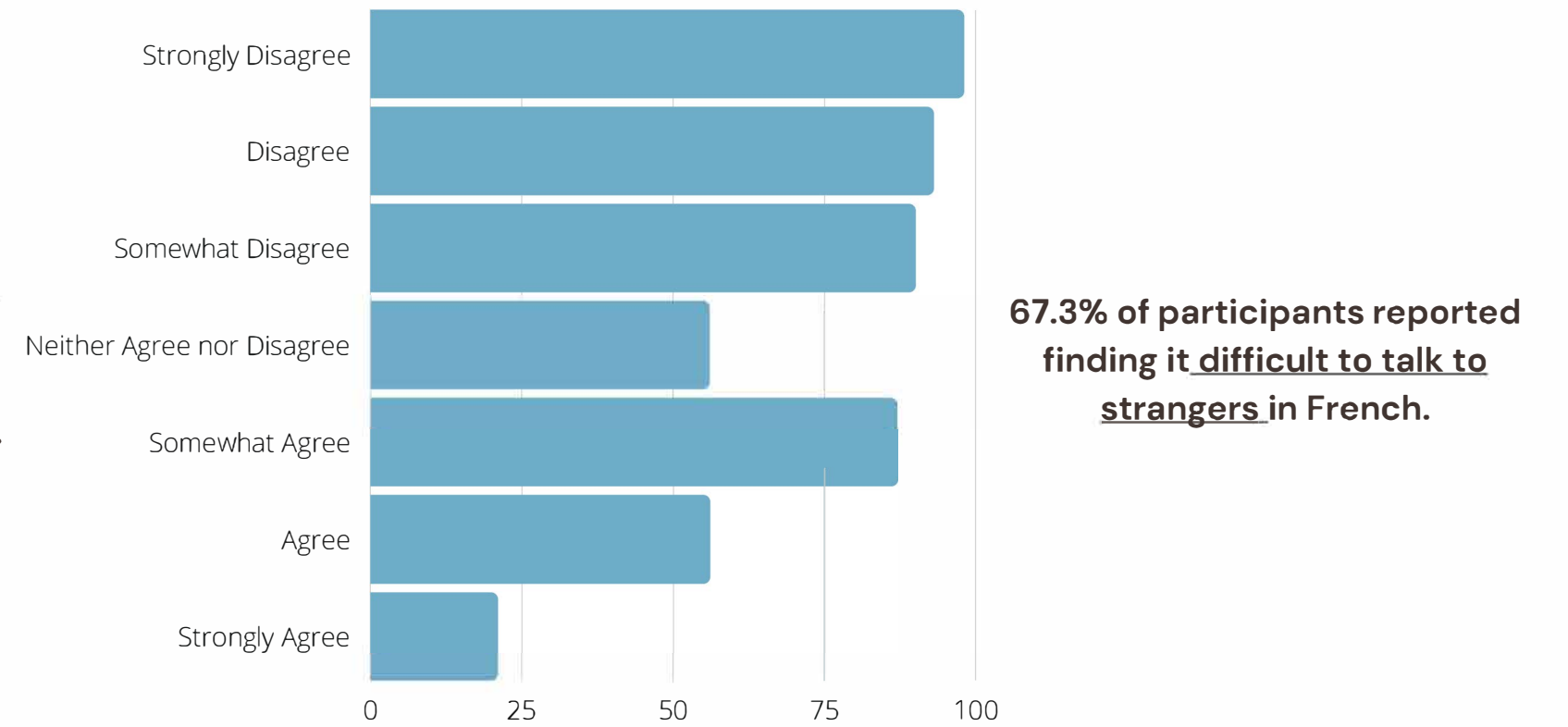
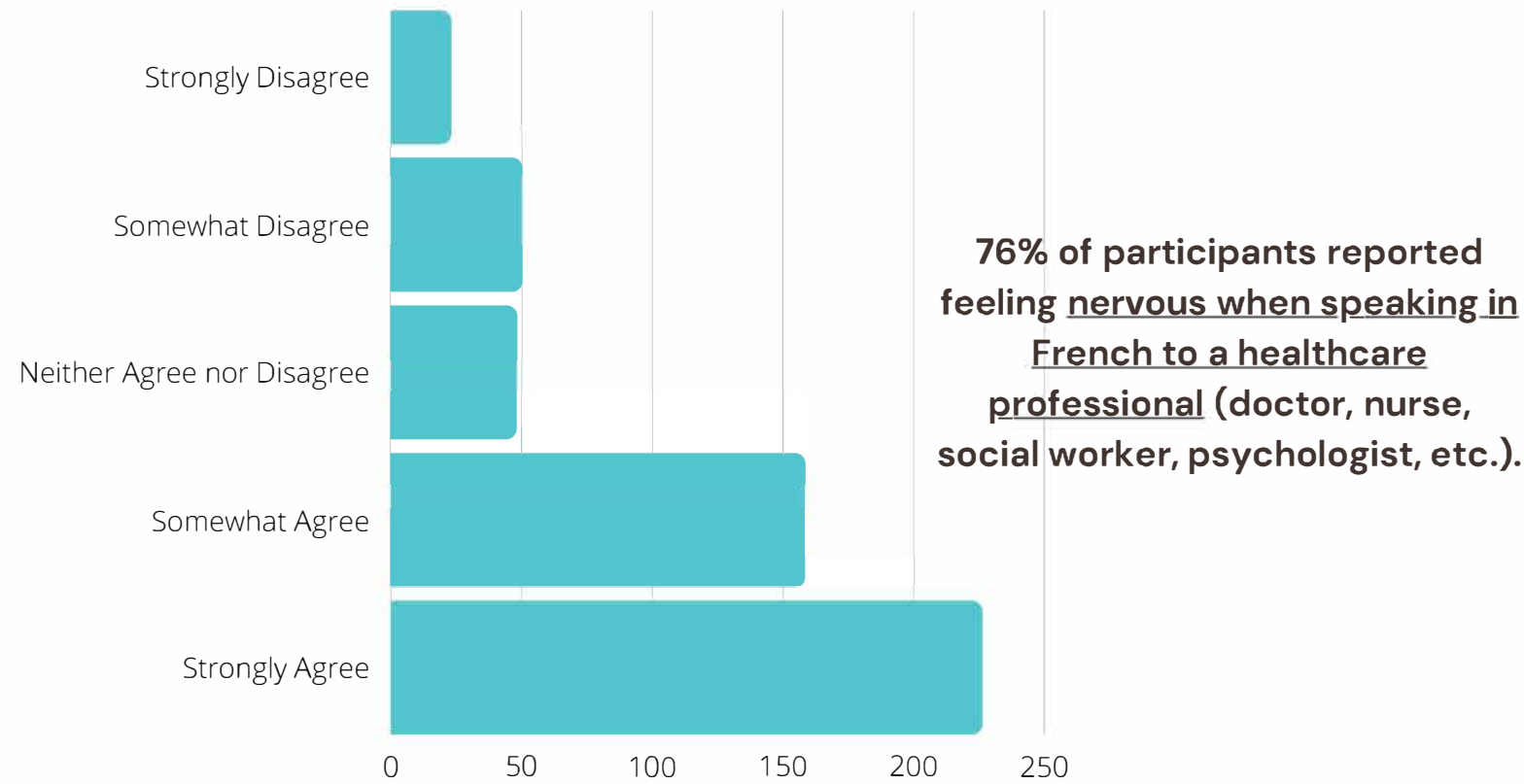
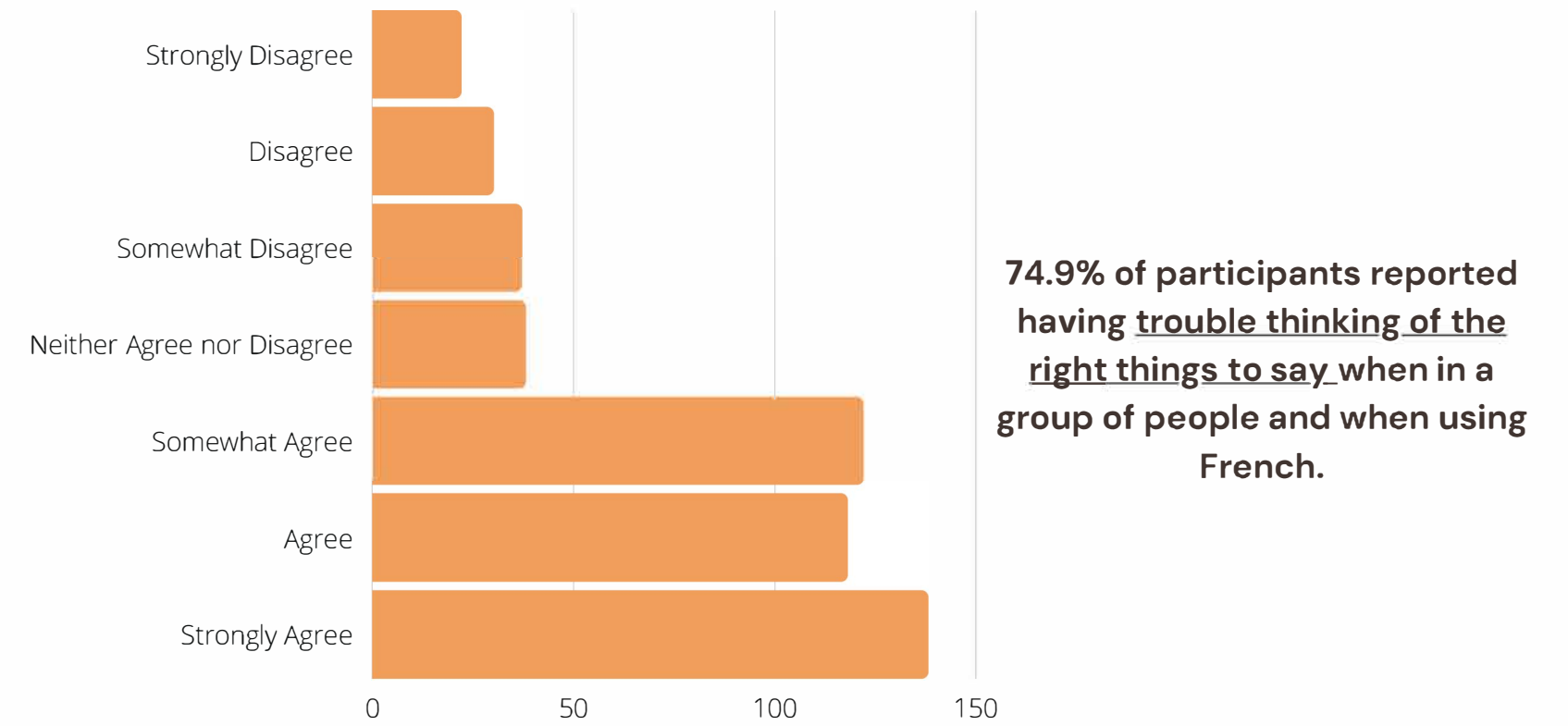
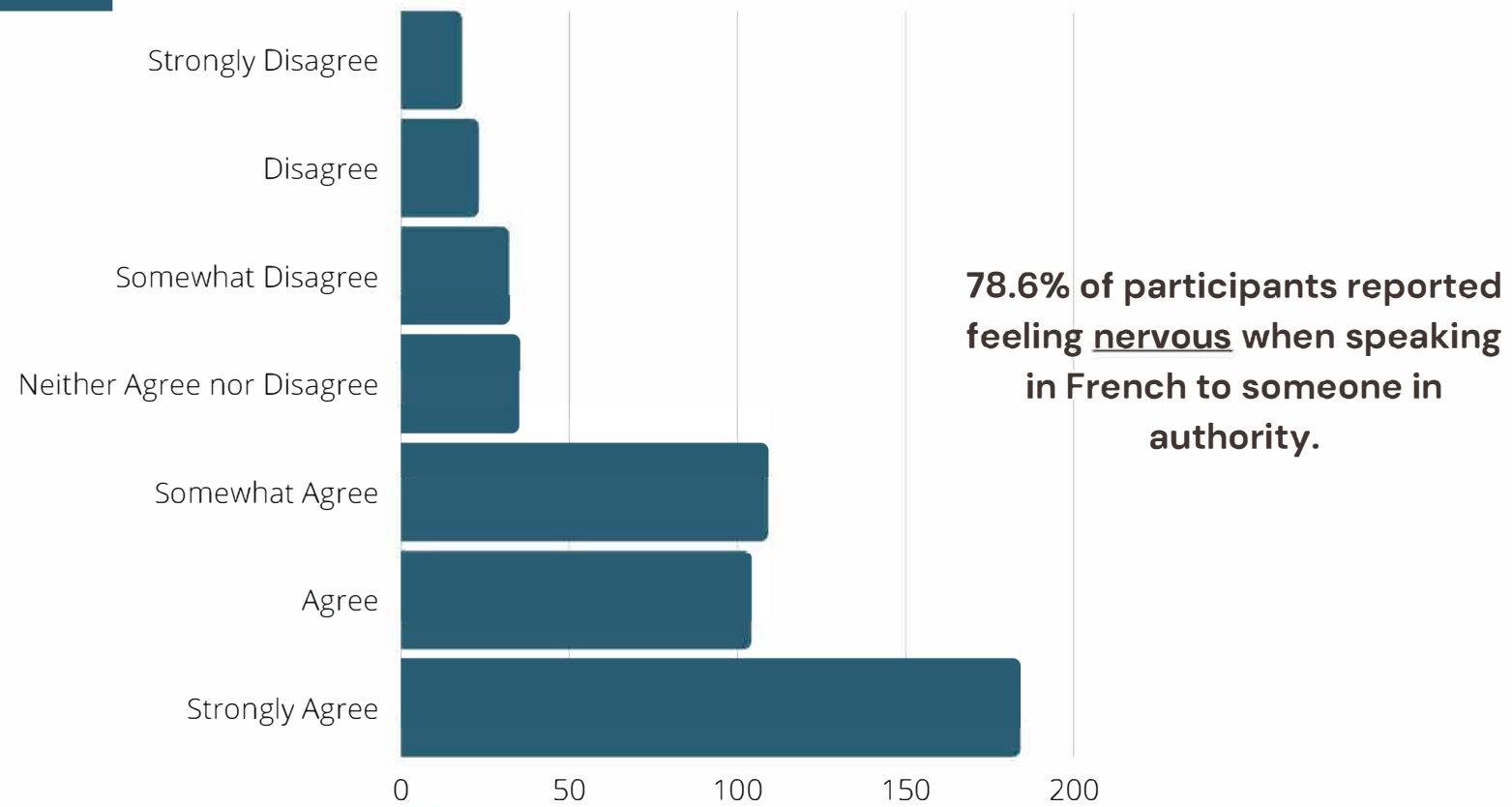
Among the respondents, **71.5%** identified as female, **25.6%** of the respondents identified as male, **4%** of the respondents identified as Other, and **2.1%** of the respondents preferred not to answer.



Challenges of English Speakers

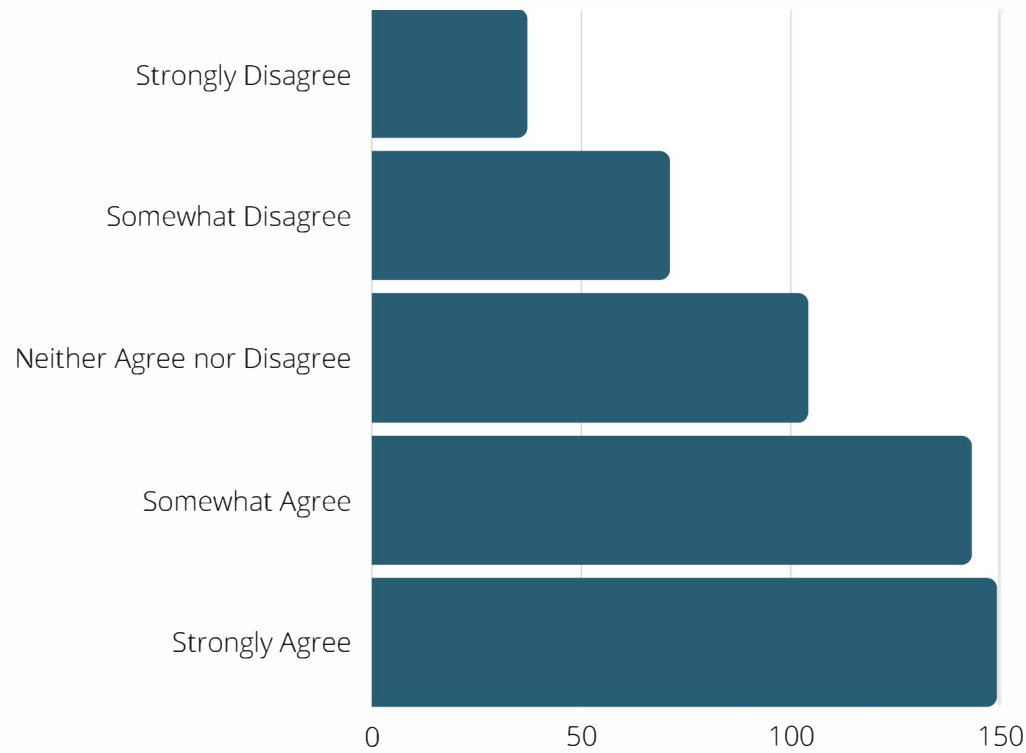


Inability to Speak French

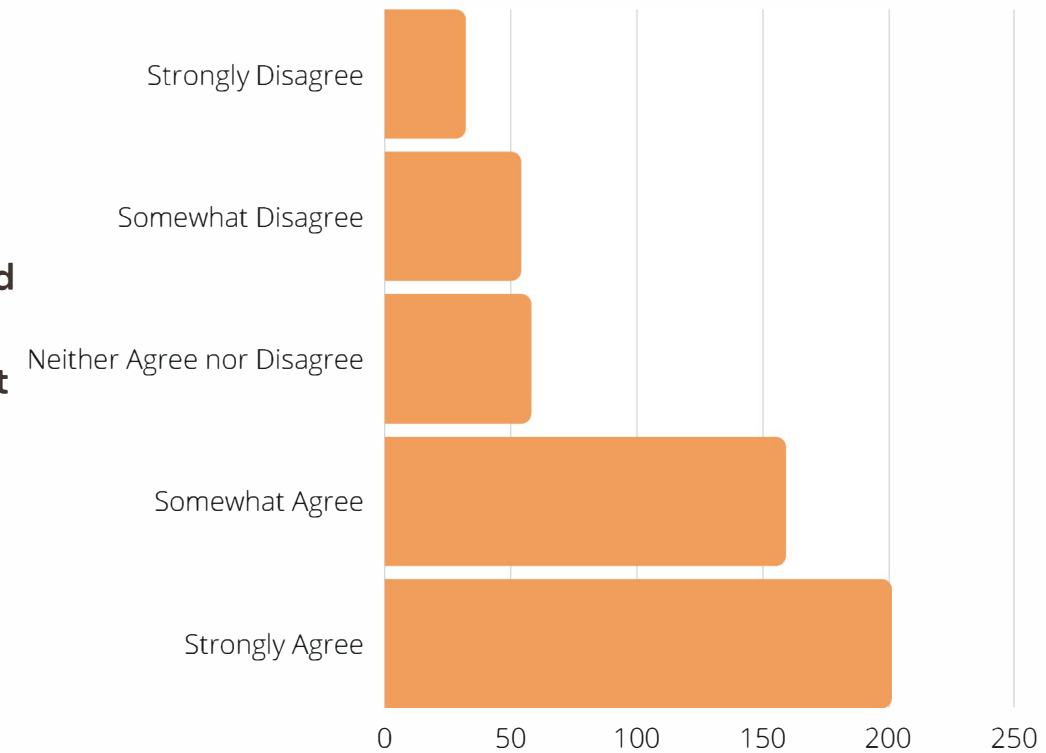


Impact of not Speaking French

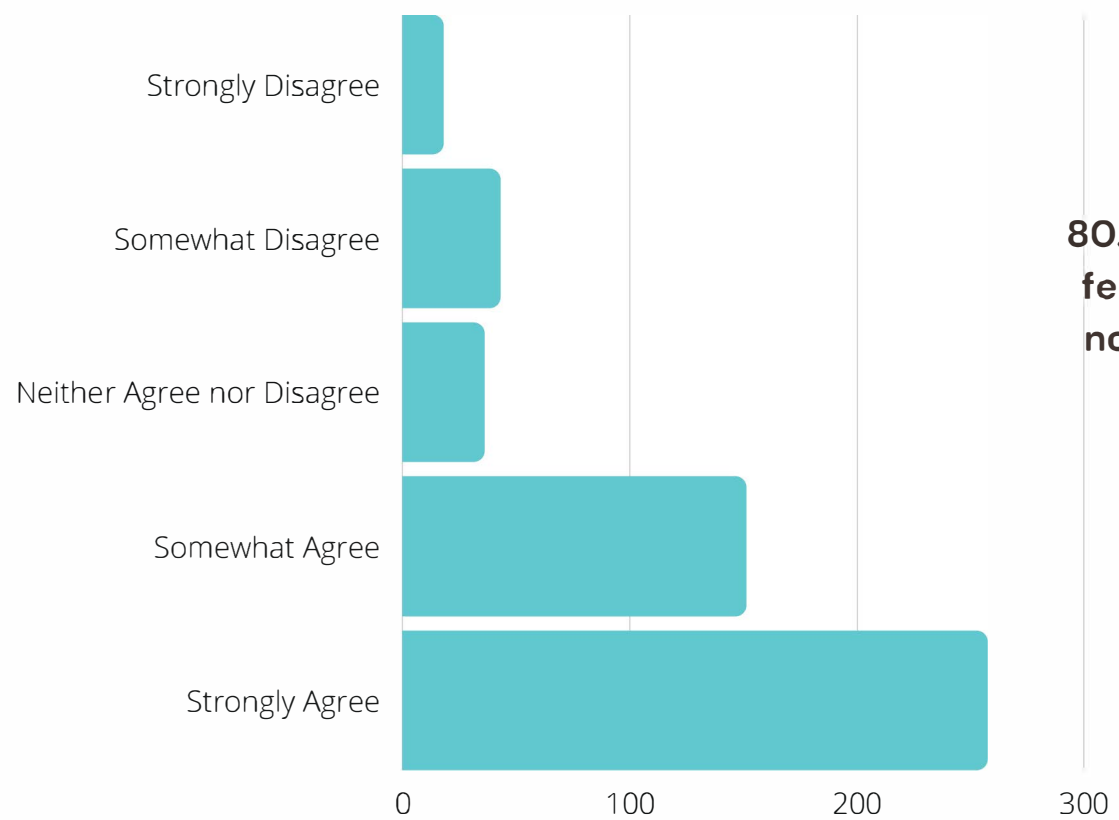
Strongly Disagree – Strongly Agree



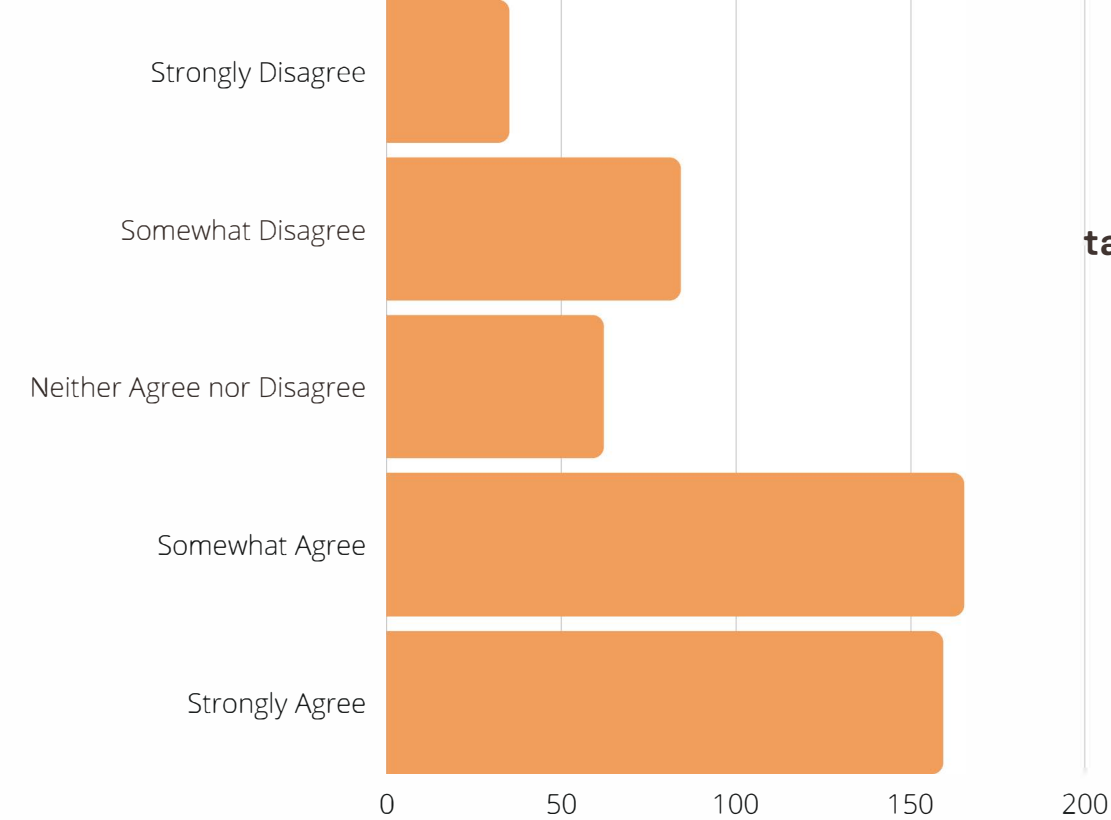
57.9% of participants reported feeling very self-conscious when speaking French in front of other patients (e.g., in the waiting room).



71.4% of participants reported feeling overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn when speaking in French.



80.8% of participants reported feeling nervous when they do not understand every French word the healthcare professional says.

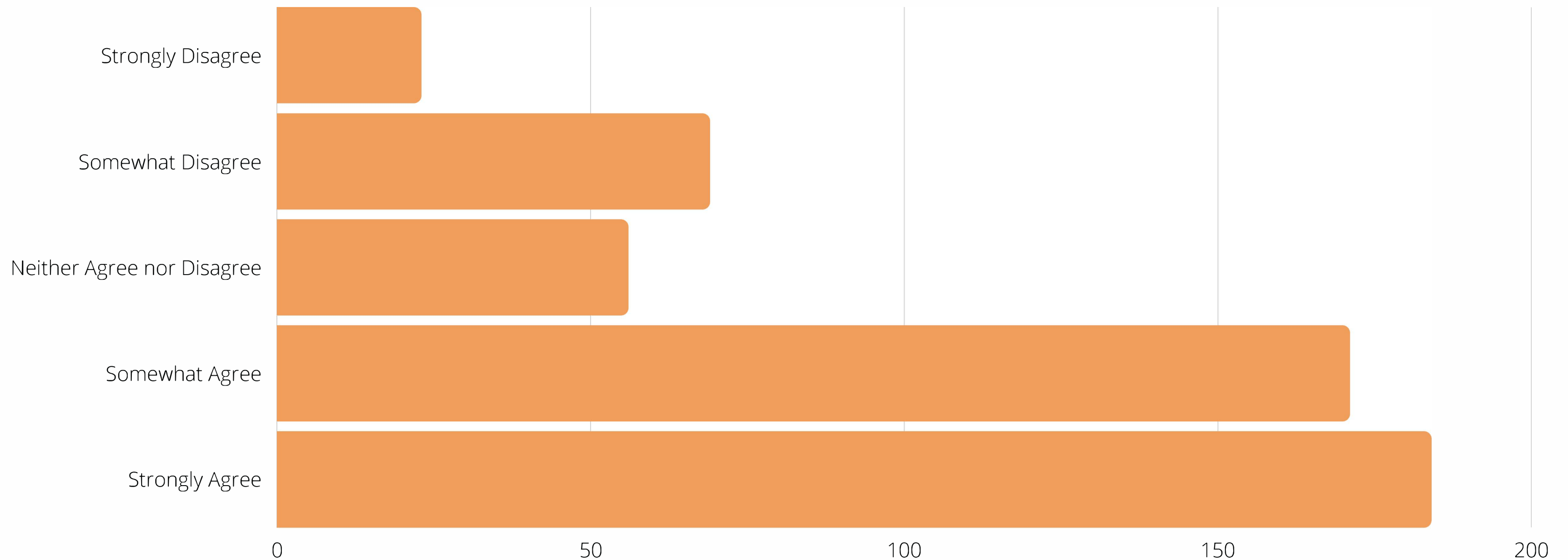


64.1% of participants reported feeling their heart pound when talking to a healthcare professional (doctor, nurse, social worker, psychologist, etc) in French

Impoverished Patient Care of English Speakers

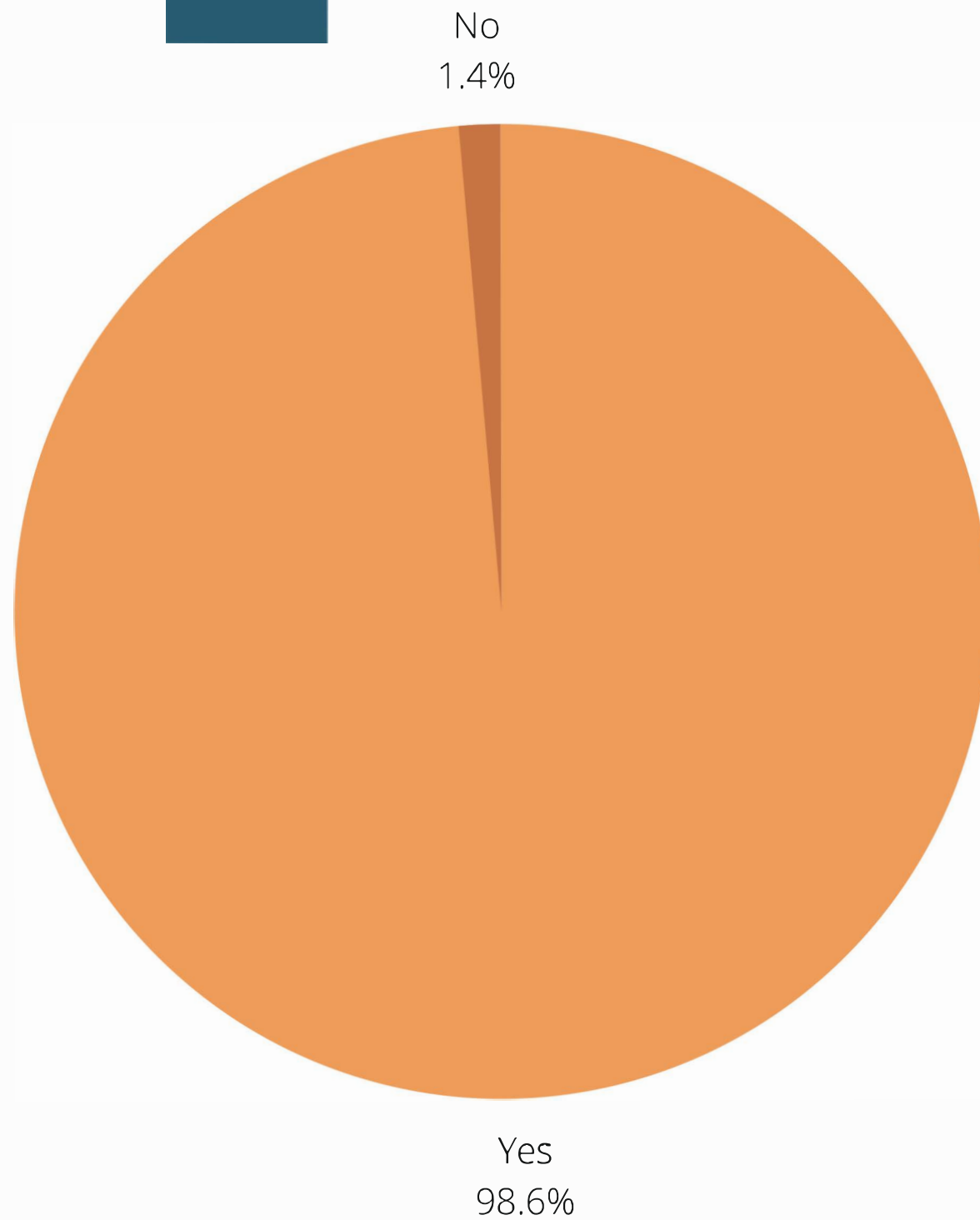
Strongly Disagree – Strongly Agree

The majority of participants reported being in agreement to feeling nervous, confused and their heart pound when speaking in French.

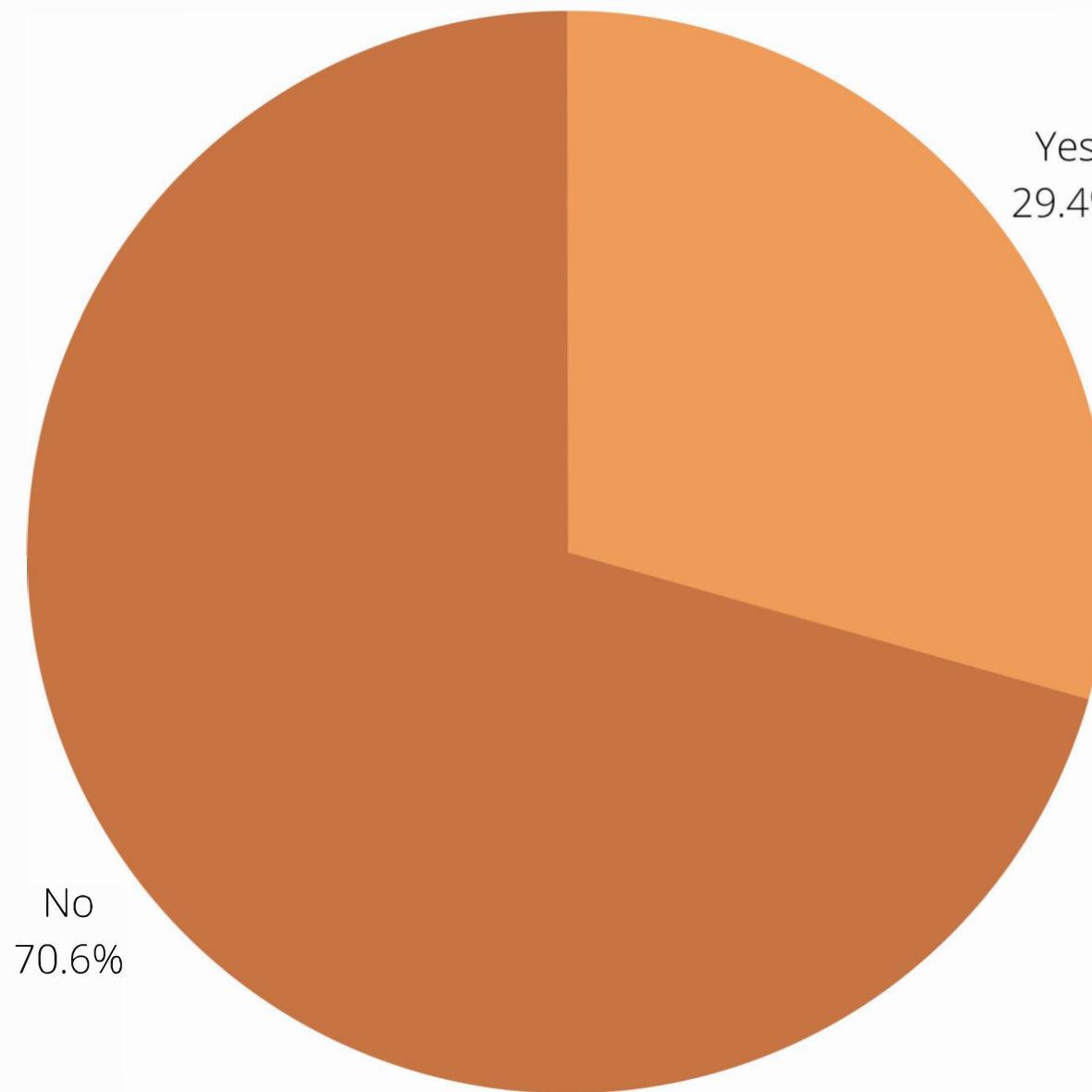


70.6% of participants reported feeling nervous and confused when speaking in French in a healthcare professional's (doctor, nurse, social worker, psychologist, etc) office

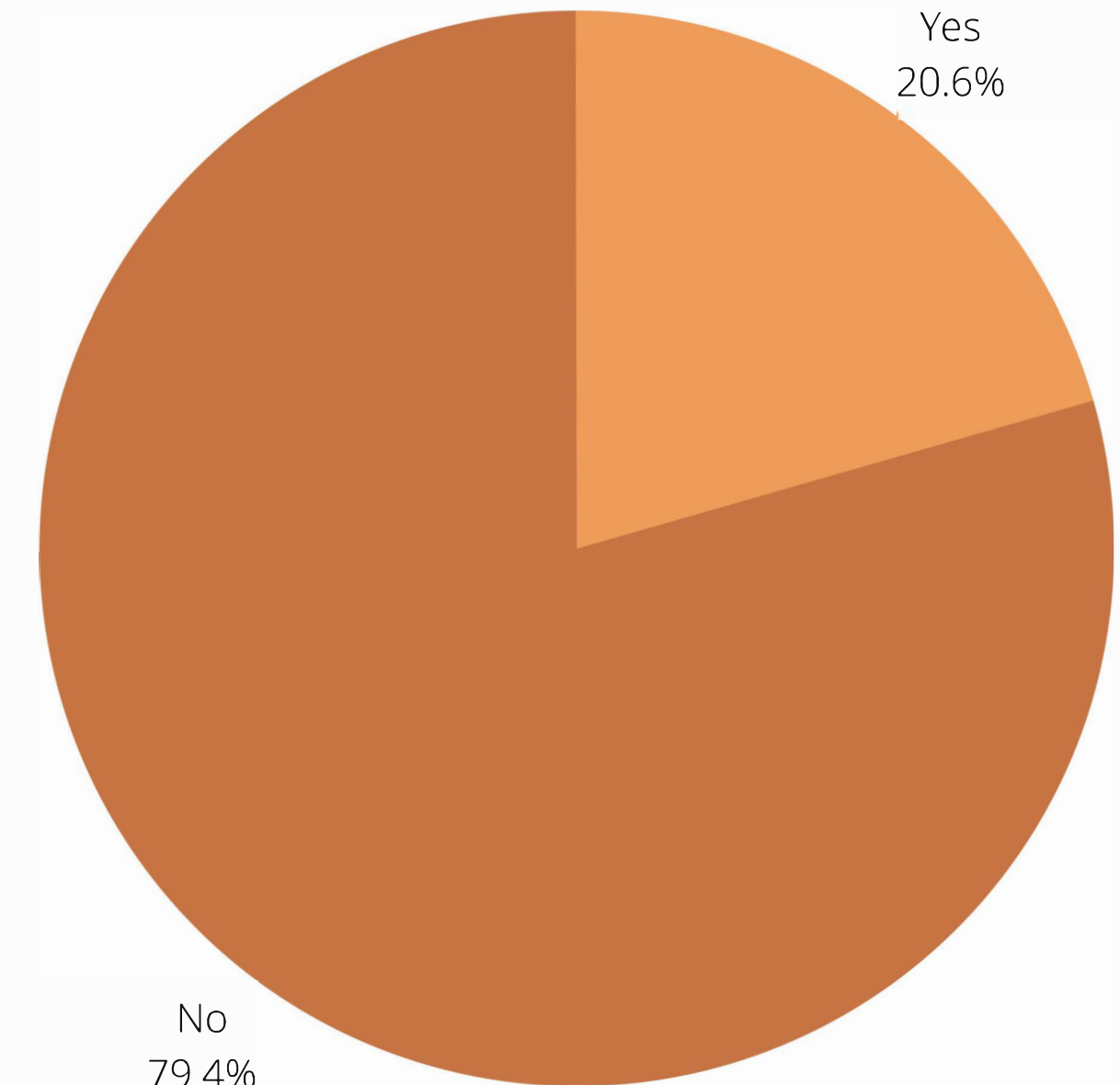
Language Proficiency



Do you speak/read/write in English everyday?



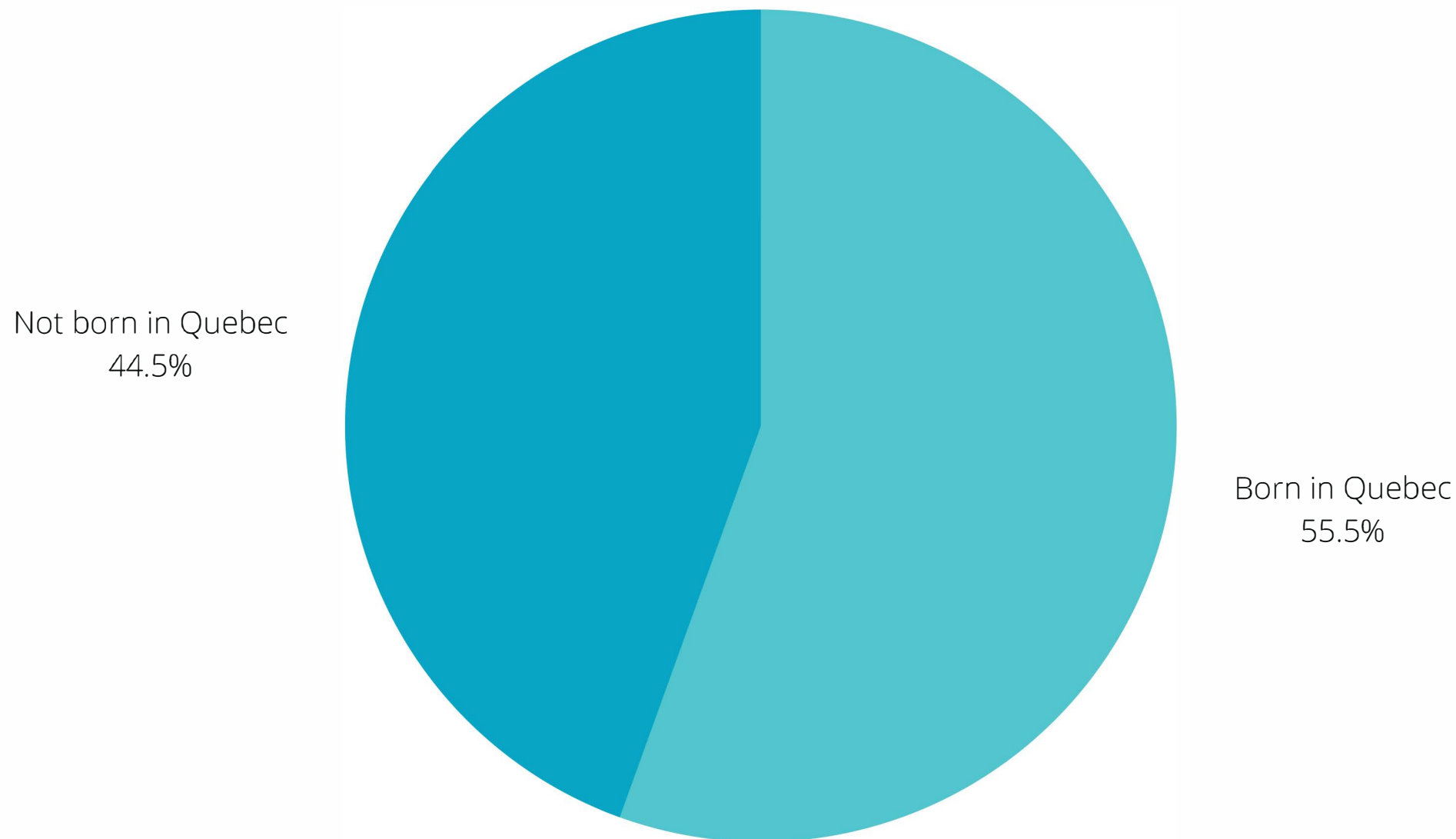
Do you speak/read/write in French everyday?



Do you speak/read/write in a language other than English/French everyday?

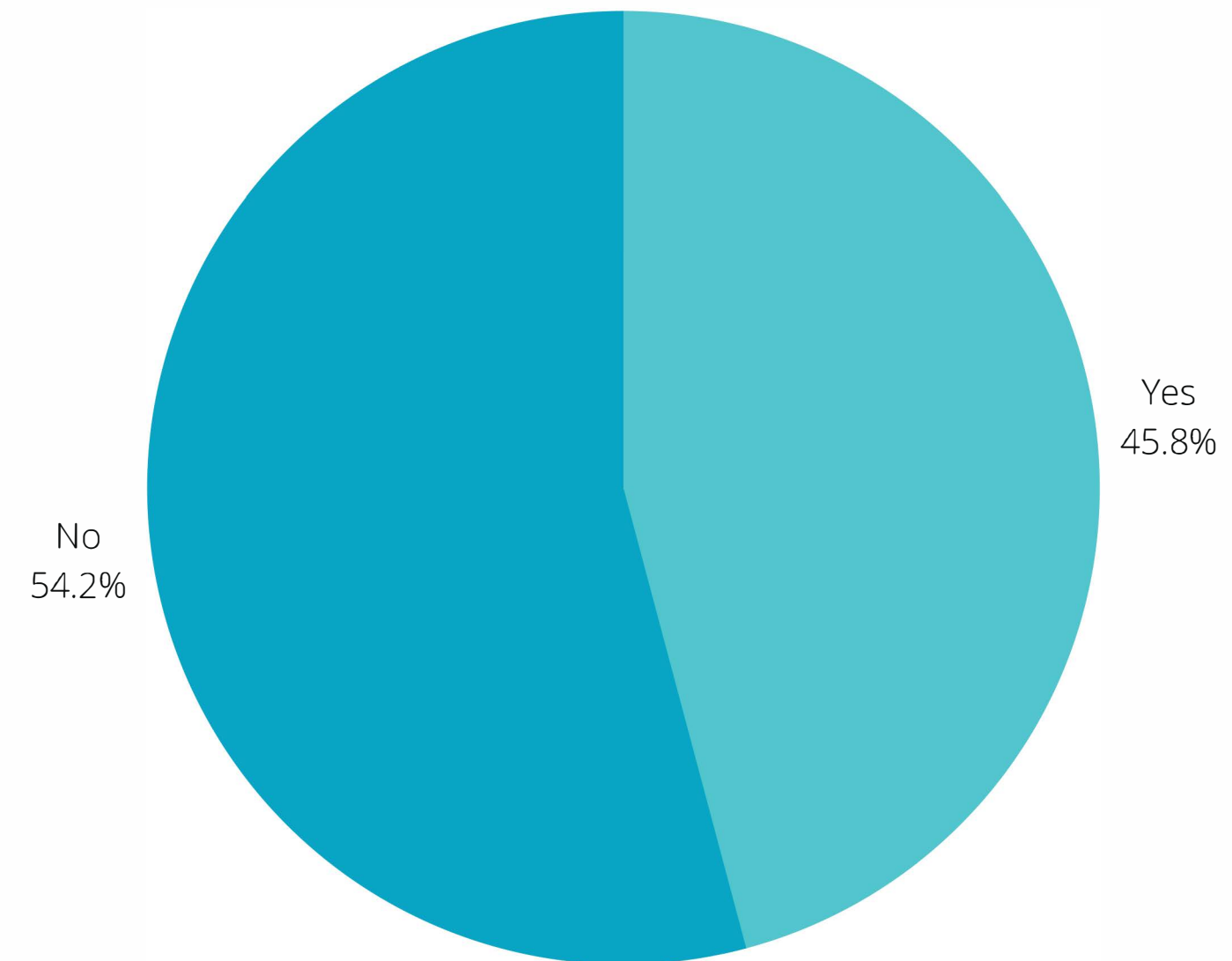
English Speakers and Place of Birth

Were you born in Quebec?



More than half of respondents reported being born in Quebec (**55.5%**), while **44.5%** of the respondents were born outside of Quebec.

Have you ever resided in a place where you did not speak the dominant communicating language?



45.8% of participants reported living in a community where they did not speak the dominant communicating language.

Finding Implications

To begin, almost half of our sample reported living in a community where they did not speak the dominant language. Therefore, difficulties navigating not only the healthcare system, but many other community and social services are anticipated. A majority of participants also expressed having never consulted a professional for their child's behavioural or psychological concerns. Recent research has linked language-related anxiety to reduced help-seeking behaviours (Zhao et al., 2021). In our sample, we found that 76% of respondents reported feeling nervous when speaking in French to a mental healthcare professional. As such, this suggests that language barriers known to English-speaking families in Quebec could account for hesitation in consulting and accessing required and timely healthcare services.



Finding Implications

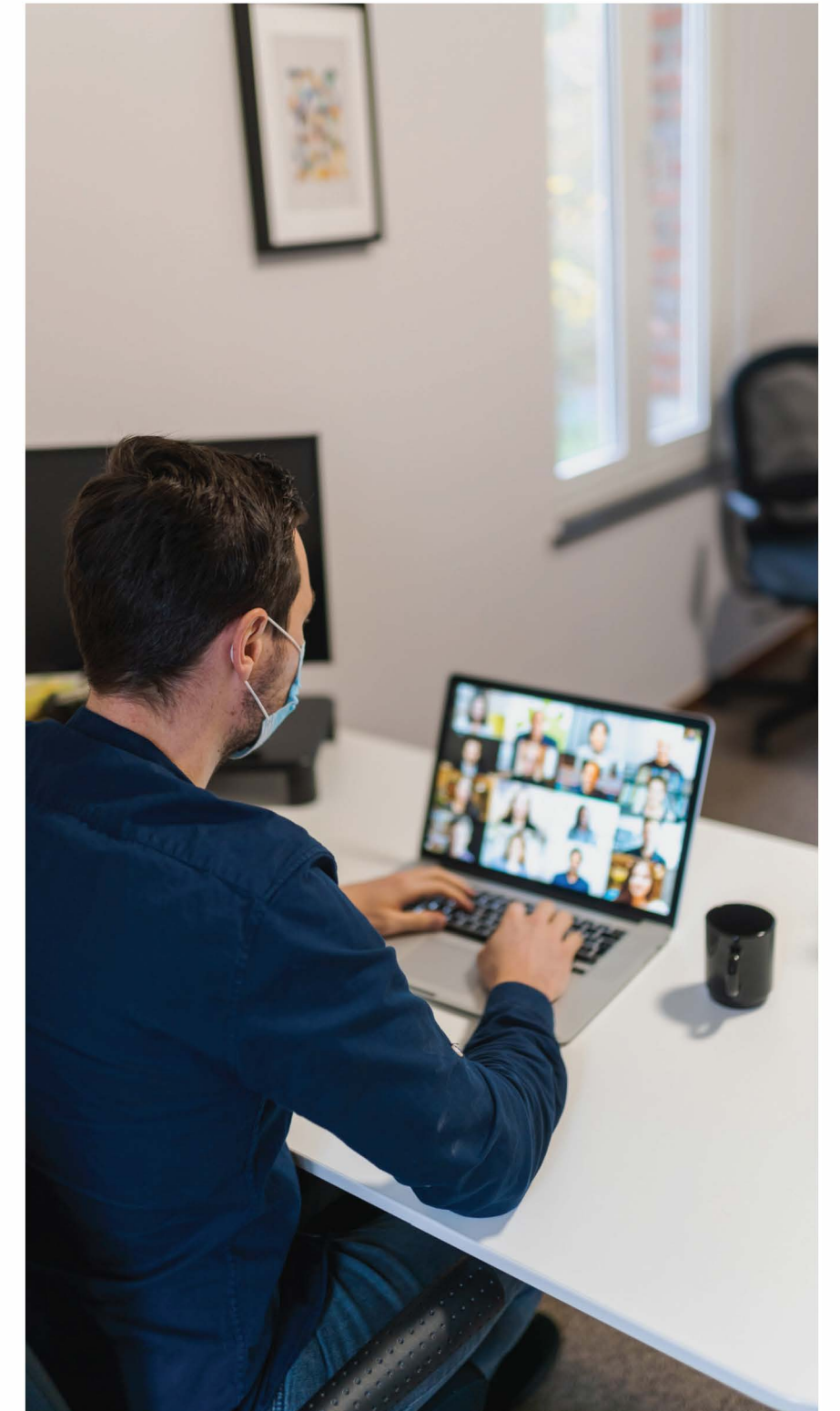


Families in need of immediate health-related services are therefore at a disadvantage when requiring immediate assistance for their children, as an English-speaking professional is not as easily accessible. Such barriers and uncertainties may lead to worsening mental health outcomes for parents, who already face an unsurmountable amount of stress navigating the healthcare system. 80% of our sample reported feeling nervous when a healthcare professional asked questions in French for which they had no advance preparation. Similar research has found that difficulties understanding medical terminology may lead to feelings of dependency and powerlessness (Tulli et al., 2020).

Lived Experiences

Selected parents (5% of total sample) took part in a qualitative interview to share their lived experiences, challenges, and barriers accessing healthcare in Quebec as English speakers. Heartfelt patient-led exchanges shed light on some key themes, including:

- 01 Language as a **barrier** to accessing healthcare services and navigating the already challenging healthcare system
- 02 Significant stress and distress experienced when accessing and receiving healthcare; in some cases affecting their **mental health**
- 03 Experiencing **helplessness** and frustration toward healthcare professionals when not receiving services in English
- 04 Requiring the **assistance** of a friend or family member to navigate the healthcare system
- 05 Challenging lived experienced as an English language speaker (i.e., **perceived "unwillingness"** of certain healthcare professionals to communicate with the public in their preferred language, English)



Barriers to Accessing Timely Care



- English-speaking families face additional barriers in both the quality and access to healthcare received in Quebec.
- Specific challenges faced by English speakers may include longer wait-times to consult a professional in their preferred language, difficulties describing symptoms or understanding treatment options, navigating government websites and completing documents in French, and accessing specialists in their region.
- English speakers were found to be less likely to have access to a regular medical doctor and use health services, leading to the use of alternative health services such as telephone health lines and tele-health services (Ngwakongnwi et al., 2012)
- The lack of linguistic resources may also impact children's development. For instance, a study conducted by Sritharan & Koola (2018) found decreased quality and quantity of services available for families with a child diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) when a language barrier is present.

Stress and Helplessness Affect Mental Health



- Reported helplessness and frustration in families' ability to access quality healthcare present additional stressors and negative mental health outcomes such as increased anxiety, depression, and feelings of isolation (Tulli et al., 2020)
- A lack of trust in the system's ability to provide quality care and elevated stress negatively impact families' willingness to seek out health and social services when issues arise.
- A recent study (Zhao et al., 2021) found that English speakers in Quebec experienced significant health communication anxiety, which affected their willingness to use both physical and mental health services.
- As such, families' reluctance to seeking early help may reducing preventative measures and lead families to only seek out help when facing an emergency, overwhelming the use of emergency-designed resources.
- Research also indicates that minority language speaking parents must strengthen their resilience to overcome the aforementioned stress and challenges in accessing healthcare for their children (Aube et al., 2019)

Mental Health and Ease of Communication



- Difficulties communicating information between and healthcare professionals are significant factors impacting their reported levels of stress, helplessness, and discomfort seeking help.
- English speaking families, particularly immigrant families, may not have access to a close family member or friend to translate information provided by physicians or pediatricians.
- As such, finding a translator to accompany families to their appointments presents additional barriers and issues for confidentiality. Parents may feel as though they are less involved and informed on their child's care when unable to directly communicate with professionals (Tulli et al., 2018)
- Even bilingual parents may nonetheless experience discomfort and suffering when navigating the healthcare system, as its dominant French presence may induce feelings of unease in their French-speaking abilities.
- Research has also found that primary care practitioners' experience difficulty conveying empathy and accessing the emotions of patients when using a translator or interpreter (Brisset et al., 2013)

Recommendations and Future

Directions

01 **Leading with compassion**

Participants expressed frustration and helplessness when navigating the primarily French healthcare system. Professionals in this network must therefore lead with compassion and understanding that not everyone speaks French, and that some patients will require additional support.

02 **Clearly communicating with patients**

Clearly communicating with patients who experience language barriers is essential for the accurate description of symptoms, treatments, or side effects. Professionals must responsibly ensure that patients are able to express their medical concerns with ease, yet understand their physician's limitations.

03 **Equitable access to healthcare services**

It is critical for each region of Quebec to have a proportion of their healthcare professionals to provide care in English to accommodate the English speaker community in their region. All patients must have equitable access to healthcare services, doctors, and establishments, regardless of language spoken.

04 **Prioritizing mental health**

As language plays a large role in many mental health services provision, the access to English-speaking psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, and all other mental health professionals must be a priority for policymakers and professionals in the field.

Recommendations and Future

Directions

05 Changes in policy

Policy-makers must consider the diversity of healthcare users and take concrete action to reduce existing language barriers to accessing healthcare services in Quebec. Providing additional funding for assistive technologies, interpreters, and English-speaking professionals in the healthcare system.

06 Patient-led initiatives to improve healthcare

Patient participation in healthcare decision making empowers patients and improves services and health outcomes. Studies have found that doctor-patient relationship, recognition of patient's needs and knowledge, allocation of patient care, and experiences in relation to health services can be importantly improved when patients are involved.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As we move forward in strengthening our healthcare system in Quebec, the need arises **to include people with lived experience as part of decision-making initiatives**. Research has revealed that activities which are not supported by evidence lead to ineffective or unnecessary care, or harm, poor outcomes, and low-value healthcare. **Language is just one of the many barriers the healthcare system is faced with**. Healthcare professionals' well-being is yet another key determinant of the quality of patient care being delivered to service users. Participants in the qualitative interview rated **active listening and caregiver relationship as being more critical** than wait time or reputability of the physician. Thus, we have much to gain by **prioritizing social connectedness, inclusion, and engagement in preventive health services.** 20

Leveraging Community Organizations' Resources to Address Language Barriers in Mental Health Access and Care

Language accessibility of mental services is just as important as other social determinants of health, including housing insecurity, poverty, social, exclusion and racism.

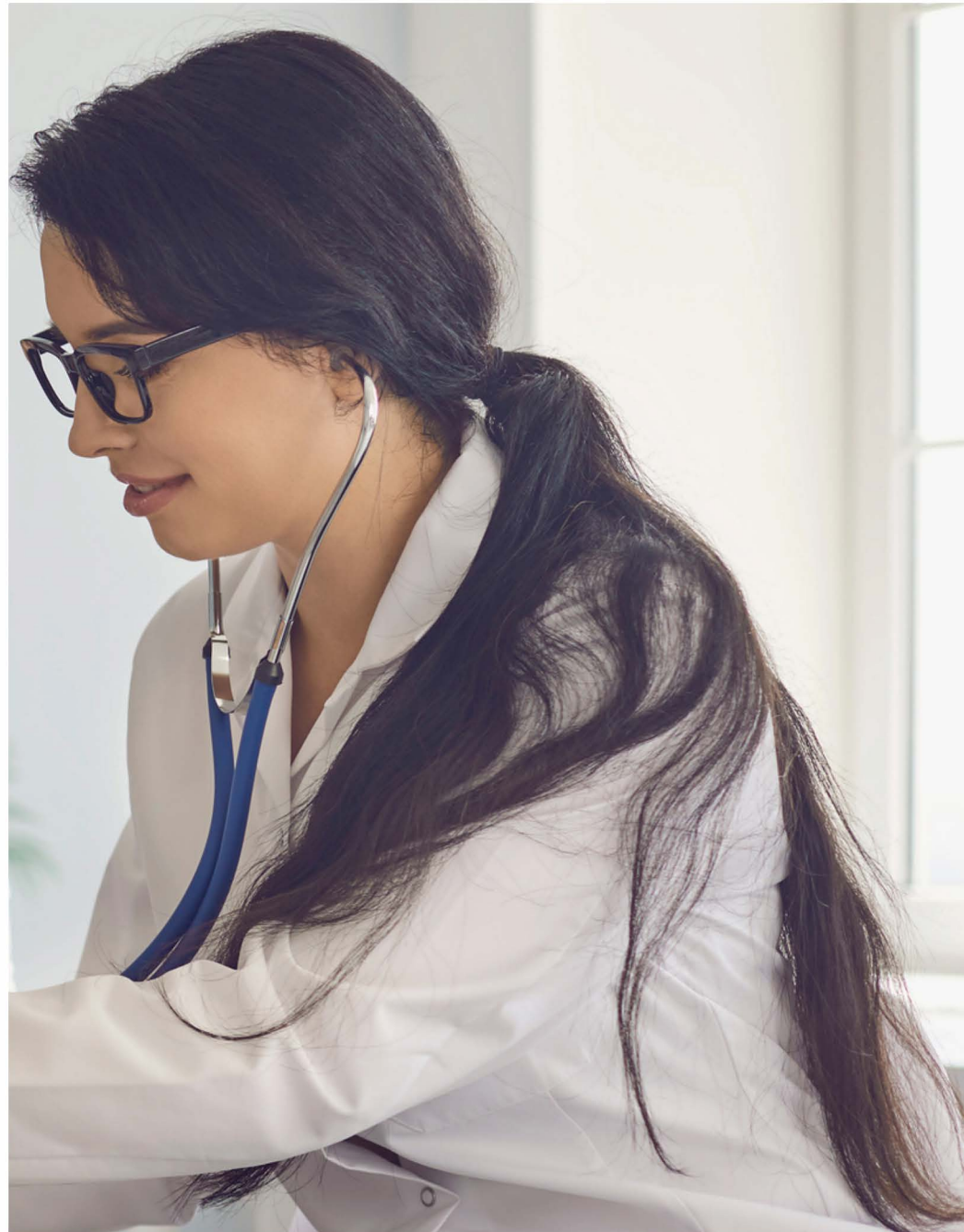


There exists an urgent need to:

- Better understand the unique mental health barriers and social determinants that affect English-speaking communities in Quebec;
- Increase knowledge of effective and relevant strategies and programs to improve mental health and address key social determinants arising from not speaking a dominant language, including a focus on children, youth and their families in community settings;
- Strengthen the capacity of English speakers in Quebec to address language-based mental health barriers and access to timely care.

Report Prepared by C.A.R.E. Research Group

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FOR INQUIRIES PLEASE REACH OUT

We look forward to hearing from you!



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