

BY THE NUMBERS: HOW ARE COMMUNITIES COUNTED?

Statistics are used to paint a picture -- to tell a story. What statistics are presented, and how they are utilized and to what ends, is another matter. They are instruments used at the discretion of the storyteller.

Canadians have a special interest in statistics that tell our linguistic story. We pay special attention to statistics related to our two official languages, and to the languages of Indigenous people. When looking at language data, it is important to consider two things: what is being measured (the variable); and where is it being measured (the geography).

For example, data that classifies individuals by mother tongue – the first language learned and still understood when the data is collected – is most often used by storytellers who are tracking language and its connection to culture or belonging to a specific ethno-linguistic group.

A storyteller who is focused on language chooses between variables such as language spoken regularly at home; language spoken at work; or knowledge of a language.

In Canada, a person's First Official Language Spoken (FOLS) serves to categorize the population between the country's two main language groups. This variable is commonly used in federal policy circles as a way to describe belonging to an Official Language Minority Community (OLMC). Statistics Canada calculates FOLS using three federal Census questions: knowledge of Canada's official languages, mother tongue, and home language.

Because FOLS does not rely exclusively on a person's mother tongue, it is a more inclusive definition. This approach captures many in Quebec referred to as 'Allophones' -- people who have a mother tongue other than French or English.

Understanding what geography is being used is also important. So, let's work through an example using Montreal.

There are several Montreal geographies from which to choose. Let's limit ourselves to the City of Montreal (not the island), with a population of 1.7 million, and the Montreal Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) which includes 'la couronne' with a population of 4.1 million. All figures are from the 2016 Census.

The English Mother Tongue population of the City of Montreal is 208,140. Its FOLS English population is 471,585, or 28.1 per cent of the total population. The English mother tongue population of the Montreal CMA is 444,955. Its FOLS English population is 888,280, or 21.9 per cent of the total population.

So, depending on the point that you want to make, both the following statements are correct:

- Francophones make up less than 50 per cent of Montreal's total population; and

- Francophones make up about 80 per cent of total population of the Montreal area (French FOLS, Montreal CMA)

In the first statistic, we used the single response French mother tongue variable measured for the City of Montreal. In the second, we used the French FOLS variable in the Montreal CMA.

You can see how choosing the data and geography is important to the goal of the storyteller. And of course, this is essential for the discerning audience to keep in mind...

Using the mother tongue statistic, the English-speaking population of Quebec constituted 7.5 per cent of the province's population in 2016. Measuring by First Official Language Spoken (FOLS), our community made up 13.7 per cent of the population -- a dramatically higher figure.

Language Spoken Most Often at Home is another statistic often used. This indicates the everyday language use in the private sphere. An individual may have learned a different language at birth, but the language they use at home indicates the language with which they are most comfortable.

In the 2016 Census, 9.8 per cent of Quebecers indicated English was the language they most often used at home. These numbers are sometimes used to define the English-speaking community of Quebec.

Depending on the government or the report, these definitions will be used to measure growth or decline of one community in comparison to another. Since 1996, the demographic weight of the English-speaking community has declined when measured by Mother Tongue and to Language Used Most Often at Home. When measured by FOLS, our numbers have increased.

The QCGN uses the First Official Language Spoken variable when defining the number of English-speaking Quebecers. We do so not because it provides the largest number, but because FOLS is more indicative of those who may wish to communicate, or seek services, in English. When advocating on behalf of the English-speaking community, we judge it most appropriate and fair to advocate for all who are likely to consider English as their First Official Language Spoken -- and not simply those whose Mother Tongue is English.

Besides, the federal government defines linguistic minorities using the FOLS variable. Who are we to argue?

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