

INCOME DISPARITIES BETWEEN QUEBEC'S ENGLISH SPEAKERS AND FRANCOPHONES OVER TIME

By Patrick Donovan, PhD¹ and Shannon Bell, MPA²
Reviewed by Vincent Geloso, PhD³ and Lorraine O'Donnell, PhD⁴

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This brief looks at income disparities between English speakers and Francophones in Quebec. It examines changes from the early 20th century, when Anglophones dominated many major industries, through political and cultural shifts between 1940 and 1980 to today's landscape.

The Linguistic Income Gap Was an Upper-Class Phenomenon

Quebec Francophones were poorer than Anglophones for a long time. There is evidence of income disparity along linguistic and religious lines in the 19th century through the turn of the 20th century.⁵ Francophones as a group earned roughly 30-40% less into the 20th century (Figure 1). The income disparity by language group peaked during the 1930s Depression. After that, it gradually decreased over the next 50 years,⁵ as will be explained below. The disparity was present in Montreal and the rest of the province.⁷

¹ Quebec English-Speaking Communities Research Network, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada.

² Quebec English-Speaking Communities Research Network, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada.

³ Department of Economics, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA, USA.

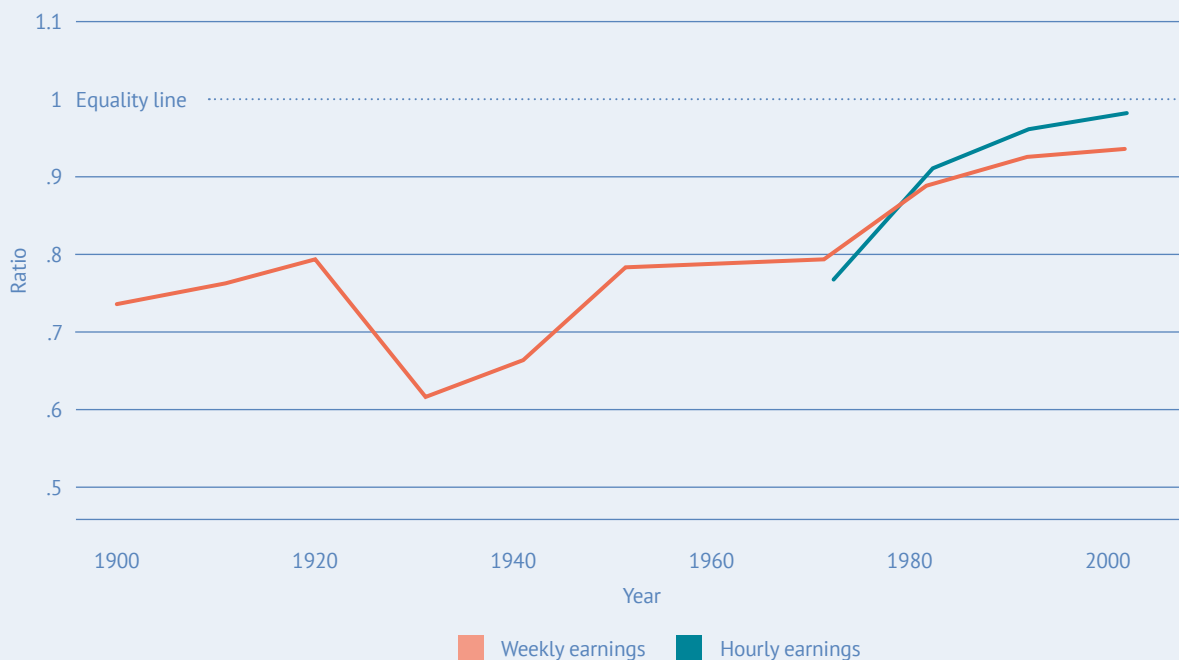
⁴ Quebec English-Speaking Communities Research Network, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada.

⁵ There is some evidence of a linguistic wage gap going back to the early 1800s among the youth labour market. See Michael Baker and Gillian Hamilton, "French/English Differences in Labour Market Compensation in 19th Century Montreal" [Working Paper], University of Toronto, 1999, <http://www.economics.utoronto.ca/public/workingPapers/UT-ECIPA-BAKER-99-02.pdf>.

⁶ Jason Dean and Vincent Geloso, "The Linguistic Wage Gap in Quebec, 1901 to 1951," *Cliometrica: Journal of Historical Economics and Econometric History* 16(3), September 2022, 621, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11698-021-00236-3>.

⁷ Dean and Geloso, 616-17.

Figure 1:
Ratio of Francophone to Anglophone Earnings in Quebec, 1900-2000



Source:

Reproduced from Dean and Geloso, 2022, Panel A, 633.

Note: This “raw” wage gap does not control for any differences in skills, work intensity, occupation, or experience (i.e., age).

The wage gap was partly due to high incomes among a small English-speaking Quebec elite. In the early 20th century, most of Canada’s wealth was controlled by industry titans headquartered in Montreal, at that point the country’s major economic hub. These men were mostly ultra-rich Protestants of British origin. They formed a tiny minority of the English-speaking population.⁸

Most Quebec Anglophones were not wealthy. In the 19th century, English speakers, especially the Irish, were disproportionately represented among unskilled day labourers, the lowest-paid workers in Montreal and Quebec City.⁹ In 1961, English speakers in the lowest-earning 71% of the population did not earn more than Francophones.¹⁰

The disproportionately high number of very wealthy Anglophones skewed the statistics. It gave a false impression that Anglophones, as a group, were wealthy. This developed into a lasting and incorrect stereotype.¹¹

⁸ Ronald Rudin, *The Forgotten Quebecers: A History of English-Speaking Quebec, 1759-1980* (Quebec: Institut québécois de recherche sur la culture, 1985), 18; Margaret W. Westley, *Remembrance of Grandeur: The Anglo-Protestant Elite of Montreal, 1900-1950* (Montreal: Libre Expression, 1990), 17.

⁹ Rudin, 81-87.

¹⁰ Jac-André Boulet, *Language and earnings in Montreal* (Ottawa: Economic Council of Canada, 1980), 26, cited in Rudin, 212.

¹¹ Richard Y. Bourhis, ed. *Decline and Prospects of the English-Speaking Communities of Quebec* (Ottawa: Canadian Heritage, 2012), 21, http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2014/pc-ch/CH3-2-16-2013-eng.pdf.

Closing the Income Gap: 1940-2005

Quebec's 1943 implementation of compulsory education for children aged 6 to 14 was a turning point in closing the income gap. The reform narrowed an educational disparity, wherein Francophones in that age group had been until then less educated than their Anglophone counterparts. With more schooling, Francophones' income levels rose, a fact showing up in income statistics by the 1970s when the cohort with higher education levels dominated the labour force.¹²

Following mandatory schooling, Quiet Revolution-era policies further narrowed the wage gap. They included the creation of new French-language higher education institutions and the Caisse de dépôt et placement du Québec, the growth of a mainly Francophone provincial civil service, and language laws prioritizing the use of French. Policies from this era to nationalize key economic sectors meant that the Francophone majority had more ownership of Quebec's resources.¹³ **In light of these changes, from 1970 to 1980, Francophones closed the wage gap by 18 percentage points, going from earning 27% less than Anglophones to 9% less. For the younger generations (ages 21-35), the income gap had fully closed by 1978.**¹⁴ **By 2000, the average Francophone salary was 3% less than the Anglophone average.**¹⁵

Outmigration of high-earning English speakers also contributed to closing the income gap. Starting in the 1960s, the shift of economic activity to Toronto and Alberta, along with Quebec's restrictions on English, led to a wave of Anglophone outmigration. **Many of the nearly 200,000 English speakers who left the province between 1971 and 1986 held high-paying jobs, so the outmigration altered the socioeconomic make-up of the linguistic community.**¹⁶

¹² Dean and Geloso, 631-32.

¹³ Julien Gagnon, Vincent Geloso, and Maripier Isabelle, "The Incubated Revolution: Education, Cohort Effects, and the Linguistic Wage Gap in Quebec during the 20th Century," *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 207 2023, 341-42, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2022.12.017>; François Vaillancourt, Dominique Lemay, and Luc Vaillancourt, "Laggards No More: The Changed Socioeconomic Status of Francophones in Quebec," *C.D. Howe Institute Background* No. 103, August 2007, 12, <https://www.cdhowe.org/public-policy-research/laggards-no-more-changed-socioeconomic-status-francophones-quebec>.

¹⁴ Vincent Geloso, *Rethinking Canadian Economic Growth and Development Since 1900: The Quebec Case* (London: Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2017), 175-76, <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-319-49950-5>. For additional information on this period, see also François Vaillancourt, *Langue et disparités de statut économique au Québec, 1970 et 1980* (Québec: Conseil de la langue française, 1988) and André Raynauld, Gérard Marion, "Une analyse économique de la disparité inter-ethnique des revenus," *Revue économique*, 1972, 1-19.

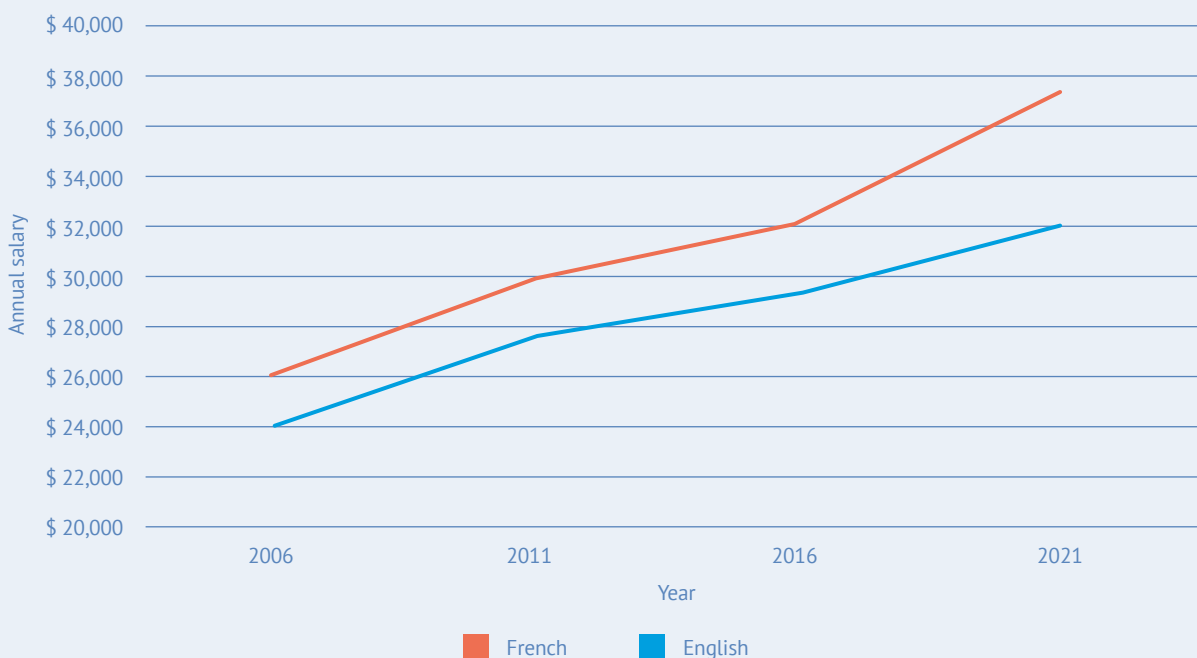
¹⁵ Dean and Geloso, 618. For an earlier pan-Canadian perspective on this period, see David Albouy, "The Wage Gap between Francophones and Anglophones: A Canadian Perspective, 1970-2000," *Canadian Journal of Economics/Revue canadienne d'économie*, 41(4), November 2008, 1211-38, <https://www.nber.org/papers/w14203>.

¹⁶ Rudin, 217, 283.

Higher Median Wages for Francophones: 2006-today

Census data since 2006 show that Francophones earn higher median wages than English speakers, regardless of gender. With each census, the gap grows, and English speakers' median earnings decrease relative to Francophones (Figure 2). Anglophones also grapple with associated consequences: higher unemployment and poverty.¹⁷

Figure 2:
Median Employment Income by First Official Language Spoken (FOLS), 2006-2021



Source:
 Statistics Canada, "Table 98-10-0642-01: Average and Median Employment Income by Gender, Census Years 2006, 2011, 2016, 2021, Canada, Geographical Regions of Canada, Provinces and Territories and Census Metropolitan Areas," retrieved April 2024, <https://doi.org/10.25318/9810064201-eng>.

However, **there continues to be a relatively small group of English-speaking men with very high incomes**, keeping the average (not median) higher for Anglophones. This was also the case for English-speaking women until 2021, when the census data showed their average income dipping below that of Francophone women. While the average total Anglophone income remains higher because of this ongoing internal disparity, the gap decreases with every census.¹⁸

¹⁷ Morgan Gagnon and Sithandazile Kuzviwanza, "A Snapshot of Poverty Among Québec's English-Speaking Communities" (Provincial Employment Roundtable (PERT), September 2023), 10, <https://pertquebec.ca/reports/a-snapshot-of-poverty-among-quebecs-english-speaking-communities/>.

¹⁸ Statistics Canada, "Table 98-10-0642-01: Average and Median Employment Income by Gender, Census Years 2006, 2011, 2016, 2021, Canada, Geographical Regions of Canada, Provinces and Territories and Census Metropolitan Areas," retrieved April 2024, <https://doi.org/10.25318/9810064201-eng>. For a more detailed analysis of changes between 1991 and 2006, see: Marie-Hélène Lussier, "The Socioeconomic Status of Anglophones in Québec" (Institut national de santé publique du Québec, August 2, 2012), <https://www.inspq.qc.ca/en/publications/1494>.

Ethnicity and immigration status have also played a role in this change. The Anglophone ethnic profile has diversified over the past 40 years. New immigrants and visible minorities are particularly vulnerable to experiencing low income. Some 33.6% of the English-speaking community of Quebec are immigrants, compared with 8.8% of the Francophone community.¹⁹

However, even in regions with few immigrants or visible minorities, such as Bas-Saint-Laurent and Gaspésie-Îles-de-la-Madeleine, English speakers have a lower socioeconomic status than Francophones. **In 16 of Quebec's 17 administrative regions, there are more English speakers than Francophones living below the low-income cutoff and experiencing poverty.**²⁰ Regional analyses show that language continues to be a primary determinant in the socioeconomic well-being of these communities, even in the case of more established British-origin populations.

Bilingualism Pays (Especially for Francophones)

Bilingualism is a form of human capital. It has always had a positive impact on income for all language groups in Quebec. Bilingual Anglophones have always earned more on average than unilingual Anglophones; the same is true for bilingual Francophones.²⁰ **The ability to use multiple well-used languages has more effect on earnings than one year of formal education.**²²

The positive impact of bilingualism has been greater for mother-tongue Francophones than Anglophones since the 1980s. The labour market in Quebec shifted to offering higher returns for speaking French than for speaking English. In recent years, the value of French in the Quebec labour market relative to English has increased to the point where **bilingualism no longer provides mother-tongue Anglophones an advantage over unilingual Francophones** when comparing people with similar levels of education, jobs, and weekly working hours.²³

¹⁹ Community Health and Social Services Network (CHSSN), "Poverty and Social Exclusion in Quebec - Quebec's English-Speaking Communities" (CHSSN, June 30, 2023), <https://chssn.org/brief-poverty-social-exclusion/>; Gagnon and Kuzviwanza, 15-17.

²⁰ Gagnon and Kuzviwanza, 11-12.

²¹ François Vaillancourt, "Les aspects économiques des politiques linguistiques en vigueur au Québec : Répercussions sur les anglophones et francophones sur le marché du travail, 1970-2015," in *La Charte : La loi 101 et les Québécois d'expression anglaise / The Charter: Bill 101 and English-Speaking Quebec*. ed. Lorraine O'Donnell, Patrick Donovan, and Brian Lewis (Quebec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2021), 223, Table 2, <https://www.pulaval.com/libreacces/9782763754369.pdf>.

²² Alex Arsenault Morin and Vincent Geloso, "Multilingualism and the decline of French in Quebec," *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 2020, 41(5), 424, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2019.1676250>.

²³ Vaillancourt, "Les aspects économiques des politiques linguistiques en vigueur au Québec," 225-26, Table 3, Table 4; Vaillancourt et al., "Laggards No More," 5-7.

Conclusion

Since the late 19th century, the linguistic income gap in Quebec not only closed, but reversed course. There was a gradual shift towards today's landscape of increased Francophone economic prospects and ownership of resources. The changes were due to factors which include the 1943 education reform, sweeping new linguistic and economic policies of the mid-century Quiet Revolution, and the outmigration of many high-earning English speakers in the 1970s and 1980s. The value of French has dramatically increased within the Quebec labour market.

Despite this general levelling of the economic playing field, disparities persist within the English-speaking community itself. A minority elite continues to hold a large share of wealth, while a growing proportion of Anglophones is vulnerable to economic hardship.

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Credits for this Brief

Authors: Patrick Donovan, PhD, and Shannon Bell, MPA

Management and production: Patrick Donovan, PhD

Content Revision: Vincent Geloso, PhD, and Lorraine O'Donnell, PhD

Linguistic revision: Linda Arui

Design template and layout: [WILD WILLI Design](#) - Fabian Will

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