

THE ROLE OF ENGLISH-LANGUAGE COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS IN QUEBEC'S IMMIGRATION ECOSYSTEM

By Lina Shoumarova, MA¹ and Chedly Belkhodja, PhD²
Reviewed by Patrick Donovan, PhD³

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English-speaking communities of Quebec (ESCQ) have a long history of welcoming immigrants⁴ and helping them settle in the province.⁵ For newcomers⁶ who don't yet speak French, English-language organizations⁷ that offer integration and settlement services can act as a social entry point or "bridge" to Quebec society. They guide newcomers to essential services and French courses, and help them find jobs and housing and build social networks. This support eases the strains of migration and helps the vitality of English-speaking communities, but also aligns with Quebec's efforts to protect French and promote integration.

^{1,2,3} Quebec English-Speaking Communities Research Network, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada.

⁴ This brief focuses on international migration and uses the term "immigrants" to refer to people who have arrived and settled in Canada from other countries. Where pertinent, the immigration status of individuals is specified. The brief uses Statistics Canada definitions, according to which an "immigrant" is a person who is or has been a landed immigrant or permanent resident and has been granted the right to live in Canada permanently. This category includes economic migrants, refugees, family-sponsored immigrants, and naturalized citizens. It does not include the category "non-permanent residents," which refers to asylum claimants and permit holders (work or study).

⁵ See Lorraine O'Donnell, "La Diversité, la pauvreté et le capital historique et social des communautés d'expression anglaise du Québec," in *Les collectivités locales au cœur de l'intégration des immigrants*, edited by Lucille Guilbert, Estelle Bernier, and Michèle Vatz Laaroussi, 161-68, Quebec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9782763717715-013> and Guy Rex Rodgers, *What We Choose to Remember*, documentary, ELAN, 2022, <https://whatwechoosetoremember.ca/>.

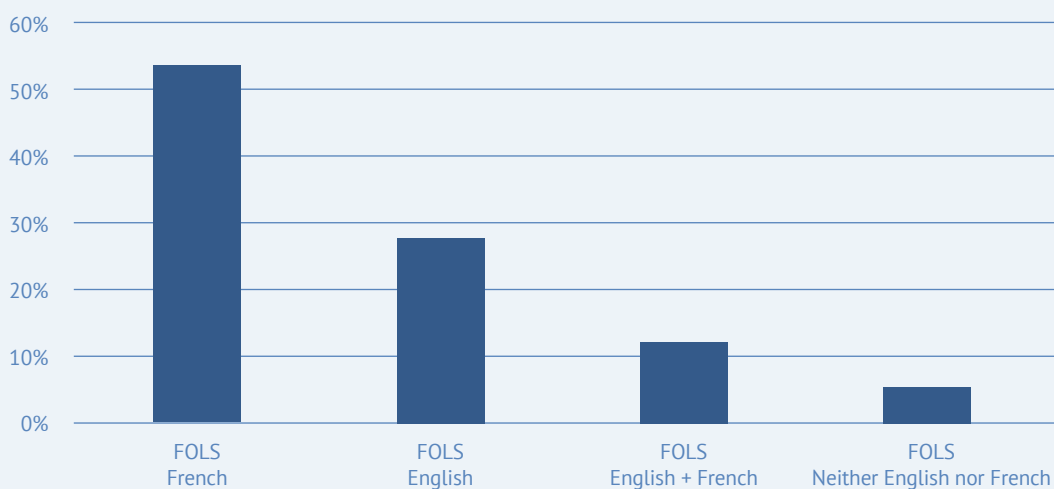
⁶ The term "newcomers," while not official, refers broadly to individuals who have recently (usually within five years) arrived in a region, whether as international or interprovincial migrants, and is often used in contexts related to settlement and early integration; newcomers have varying immigration status. In this brief, the term refers solely to international newcomers, unless otherwise specified.

⁷ For the purposes of this brief, these are organizations that operate in English as their primary official language, but may also use other languages in their work, including French.

Linguistic portrait of newcomers and temporary residents in Quebec

Data from Statistics Canada⁸ shows that 202,740 immigrants settled in Quebec between 2016 and 2021, adding to the 205,775 non-permanent residents residing in the province in 2021. This totals 408,515 people, representing 4.92% of the province’s population. Of this group, 53.46% had French as their primary official language,⁹ 28.94% had English, 12.5% had English and French, and 5.09% had neither English nor French (see Figure 1). Among this group, 76.13% could speak one or many non-official languages.

Figure 1:
Linguistic portrait of newcomers and temporary residents in Quebec, by first official language spoken (FOLS), 2021.



Source: Statistics Canada, 2023.

⁸ Canada, Statistics Canada, "First official language spoken by knowledge of languages, place of birth (including provinces) and immigrant status and period of immigration: Canada, provinces and territories and census metropolitan areas with parts" (Table 98-10-0616-01), June 21, 2023, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25318/9810061601-eng>.

⁹ Based on first official language spoken (FOLS) data.

Integration support in Quebec

When newcomers arrive in Quebec, they receive welcome and integration assistance through nonprofit organizations funded by the Ministère de l'Immigration, de la Francisation et de l'Intégration (MIFI). The Ministry's website lists 168 such organizations across the province.¹⁰ They help newcomers find housing and employment, enroll in French courses, and settle in regions outside Montreal. While assistance is offered predominantly in French, plurilingualism is a common feature of these front-line service organizations. Many employ staff and volunteers from diverse backgrounds who speak different languages, including English. The Ministry's website shows that 157 organizations can offer support in English among other languages.

A heterogeneous English-language sector

The English-language community settlement and integration sector in Quebec is “greatly varied,”¹¹ and unevenly spread throughout the province, with organizations mostly in the Montreal area, where the majority of immigrants settle. Some organizations focus solely on immigration, while others provide settlement and integration services informally as part of broader responsibilities.¹²

Although these groups operate primarily in English, they do not always self-identify as English-language organizations. Sarwat Viqar from the South Asian Women's Community Centre (SAWCC) explains: “We don't present ourselves as an English-speaking organization. It is a community service organization operating in Montreal and we offer bilingual services. It is understood that because we largely cater to the South Asian community, if there is one of the two official languages that they use, obviously it is going to be English.”¹³

¹⁰ Québec, Ministère de l'Immigration, de la Francisation et de l'Intégration, “Services de soutien à l'intégration offerts par les organismes communautaires partenaires,” last update: December 9, 2024, <https://www.quebec.ca/immigration/partenaires>.

¹¹ Karen Urtnowski, Lorraine O'Donnell, Éric Shragge, Anne Robineau, and Éric Forgues, “Immigration, Settlement and Integration in Quebec's Anglophone Communities: A Preliminary Report,” *Journal of Eastern Townships Studies/Revue d'études des Cantons de l'Est* no. 38 (Spring 2012): p. 25. <http://www.etc.ca/journal/jets-archive/>.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Canada, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, *Research Symposium on English-Speaking Immigration in Quebec Organized by Research and Evaluation/Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada* [Research report], November 2015, p. 37, <https://veq.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Immigration-Symposium-2015.pdf>.

Urtnowski et al. categorize the sector into the following types of groups:¹⁴

- **Ethnocultural networks:** Groups based on ethnicity or nationality that use English as their primary official language, like PINAY Quebec (catering to the Filipino community) and the SAWCC, both in Montreal.
- **English-language community vitality organizations:** Groups that focus on the development of English-speaking communities, such as Voice of English-Speaking Quebec (VEQ) in Quebec City.
- **Neighbourhood-based organizations:** Local groups where staff mainly speak English, although many are also bilingual, like the Lasalle Multicultural Resource Centre and the NDG Community Council, both in Montreal.
- **Faith-based organizations,** such as the Montreal City Mission and the English-Speaking Catholic Council.
- **Large English-language institutions:** While not primarily focused on immigration services, they assist newcomers in navigating, for instance, Quebec’s education and health care systems.

An additional category should be added to recognize **groups that spontaneously come together to support migrants in vulnerable situations, such as refugees and asylum seekers.** This has been particularly evident in recent years, as Quebec has received a record number of asylum claims. By October 1, 2024, there were 174,137 asylum claimants living in Quebec, representing 40.4% of all asylum seekers in Canada.¹⁵ Examples of such grassroots organizations include the Bridges not Borders Collective¹⁶ in Hemmingford, near Roxham Road, and the Student Refugee Program, run by students from Bishop’s University and Champlain College in Sherbrooke.¹⁷ Another notable example is the Welcome Collective/Collectif Bienvenu, which began informally in Montreal in 2017 and has grown significantly, assisting, throughout the years, over 20,000 precarious immigrants through its various programs.¹⁸

Some¹⁹ English-language organizations receive funding from the MIFI. The majority rely on foundations, donations, volunteer work, and—for some of their activities—limited federal and municipal funding.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

¹⁵ Québec, Institut de la statistique du Québec, “Résidents non permanents selon le type, par trimestre, Québec et Canada, 2021-2024,” updated December 17, 2024, <https://statistique.quebec.ca/fr/document/migrations-internationales-interprovinciales-quebec/tableau/residents-non-permanents-type-janvier-juillet-quebec-canada>.

¹⁶ For more about this group, see Chedly Belkhdja and Cassandre Gratton, “Un geste d’hospitalité aux demandeurs d’asile. Une analyse de la mobilisation du collectif Bridges not Borders – Créons des ponts,” *Refuge: Canada’s Journal on Refugees* vol. 38, no. 2 (November 2022): 1–19, <https://refuge.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/refuge/article/view/40878/36817>.

¹⁷ To learn more, see the group’s website at: <https://www.crc-lennox.qc.ca/student-life/international-experiences/#:~:text=Refugee%20Sponsorship%20Program,and%20their%20lives%20in%20security>.

¹⁸ Welcome Collective, *2023-24 Activity Report*, p. 9. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5abb9b0625bf0234905de2ef/t/6671f9d579e66c6b3a7cd5ad/1718745562987/AR+2024+EN-web.pdf>.

¹⁹ More research is needed to determine how many organizations identify as English-speaking and how many of them receive funding from the MIFI.

Barriers

Researchers and practitioners have noted several challenges that hinder the work of Anglophone immigrant organizations.²⁰ **A major barrier is their lack of legitimacy and recognition from the provincial government and the Francophone majority.** As a result, their services are not easily accessible to newcomers, and they play a minor role in the immigrant reception and settlement ecosystem in the province. Brigitte Wellens, VEQ's executive director, says, "our biggest challenge is convincing the provincial government that we are part of the solution, not part of the problem."²¹

Laws related to language and education in Quebec create further challenges for ensuring immigrants' participation in the province's official language minority community. The 1977 *Charter of the French Language* (Bill 101)²² requires most immigrant children to attend French-language schools. The 2022 amendments of the Charter through Law 14 (Bill 96) added more restrictions.²³ Under this law, the Quebec government may communicate with newcomers in languages other than French only for the first six months after their arrival. After that, all communication must be in French only.

Other policies, like the proposed 2013 *Charter of Quebec Values* (Bill 60)²⁴ and the 2019 Law 21²⁵ on state secularism, have also affected some immigrants by creating a sense of exclusion, and suggesting that they do not belong to Quebec. Describing the impact such policies have had on the population served by the SAWCC, Viqar notes that they have heightened social isolation and reduced willingness to integrate.²⁶

²⁰ See Urtnowski et al., 2012, and Michèle Vatz Laaroussi, Javorka Sarenac, Shannon Lemay, Caroline Duteau, Ourakoie Bembello, Irma Silva-Herrera, and Frantzy Narcis, in collaboration with Voice of English Québec (VEQ), *Best Practices and Best Strategies Used by Anglophone Organizations to Welcome and Integrate Immigrants in Québec City*, (Ottawa: Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2015). <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/ircc/migration/ircc/english/pdf/research-stats/r55-2014-eng.pdf>.

²¹ Canada, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2015, p. 34.

²² *Charter of the French Language*, CQLR, c. C-11, <https://www.legisquebec.gouv.qc.ca/en/document/cs/c-11>.

²³ *An Act Respecting French, the Official and Common Language of Québec*, SQ 2022, c. 14, <https://canlii.ca/t/55fcr>.

²⁴ The *Charter of Quebec Values*, introduced in 2013 by the Parti Québécois government aimed to establish a secular society by banning public servants from wearing visible religious symbols. It sparked significant controversy and debate over religious neutrality and reasonable accommodation in Quebec. The bill was dropped after the 2014 provincial election. For more information, see Maxime Dagenais, "Québec Values Charter," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, last edited: November 16, 2017, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/the-charter-of-quebec-values>.

²⁵ *An Act Respecting the Laicity of the State*, CQLR c. L-0.3, <https://www.legisquebec.gouv.qc.ca/en/document/cs/l-0.3>.

²⁶ Canada, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2015, p. 38.

Community vitality through immigration

Like French-speaking minority communities outside Quebec, the ESCQ view immigration as a means to maintain their institutions and community vitality. In regions like the Outaouais, Bas-Saint-Laurent and Gaspésie-Îles-de-la-Madeleine, English-speaking communities face challenges such as an aging population and youth outmigration. Immigration can help address these issues by bringing in new residents. In the Capitale-Nationale region, for example, 20% to 25% of the English-speaking population is renewed by newcomers every five years.²⁷ As Wellens notes, “the economic development and the sustainability of our official language communities is directly linked to our capacity to integrate and attract immigrants and migrants.”²⁸ **The challenge for Anglophone service providers is to ensure that the Francophone majority understands that they can welcome English-speaking migrants into their communities while also helping them integrate into the broader, French-speaking Quebec society.**

A bridge role

Researchers and practitioners have highlighted the value of Anglophone organizations and networks for the settlement and integration ecosystem in Quebec.²⁹ In their study of English-speaking immigrants in Montreal and the Sherbrooke area, Gosselin and Pichette found that participants sought ways to identify with both Francophone and Anglophone communities, but relied on ESCQ cultural and religious networks to facilitate integration into Quebec society.³⁰ In another study, Vatz Laaroussi et al. observed that receiving services in English boosted immigrants’ confidence, reduced isolation, and helped them build social networks.³¹

By serving as welcoming and information hubs in English, Anglophone community organizations can ease the strain immigrants face on arrival and facilitate their transition to Quebec society. They can act as a bridge to the Francophone majority by encouraging newcomers to learn French—a necessary condition for successful integration in the province. This contributes to Quebec’s goal of protecting the French language, while reinforcing immigrants’ French-English bilingualism.

²⁷ Email communication with Brigitte Wellens, August 6, 2024. VAQ uses a broad definition of “newcomers” to refer to individuals who are new to Quebec City, including international as well as interprovincial migrants.

²⁸ Canada, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2015, p. 31.

²⁹ Vatz Laaroussi et al., 2015; Urtnowski et al., 2012.

³⁰ Cheryl Gosselin and Amanda Pichette, “Multicultural Common Spaces and the Negotiation of Belonging: The English-Speaking Communities of Quebec and the Integration of Newcomers,” *Journal of Eastern Townships Studies/Revue d’études des Cantons de l’Est* no. 43 (Fall 2014): 9–26. <http://www.etc.ca/journal/jets-archive/>.

³¹ Vatz Laaroussi et al., 2015.

Vatz Laaroussi et al. identified strategies and best practices that show how working with the ESCQ can strengthen Francophone society:³²

Welcoming cities

Cities can play a key role in immigration by showing political will to welcome and support newcomers. For instance, Quebec City, with its strong economy and low unemployment, is an attractive destination for immigrants. The city partners with local Anglophone organizations, helping to integrate immigrants into both English- and French-speaking communities.³³

Partnerships and networks

Cooperation between Anglophone and Francophone immigration organizations is crucial for connecting newcomers to essential services. This helps immigrants integrate and stay in the area. Strong partnerships with Francophone organizations also enhance the recognition and legitimacy of Anglophone efforts in the immigration and settlement sector.

Linguistic security

Linguistic security refers to immigrants' confidence in being understood and understanding the host society, and it plays a key role in their retention in the regions they initially settled. English-language organizations can help build linguistic security by offering services to non-Francophone immigrants, which can boost their confidence in learning French.

Bilingualism as a positive resource

Linguistic security improves when bilingualism is viewed as a valuable resource that aids personal and social integration while benefiting the host society. Bilingualism also offers a competitive advantage in a globalized labour market. In Quebec City, many employers turn to VEQ to find bilingual candidates.³⁴

Creating an intercultural climate and a sense of belonging

Encouraging interactions among people of different linguistic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds helps attract and retain immigrants, fostering a sense of belonging. Research in Quebec City shows that using English-language services helps immigrants connect with the local Anglophone community, and, for some, their ethnic community as well. This sense of belonging, combined with good socioeconomic integration, extends beyond language to the broader Quebec City community.³⁵

³² Vatz Laaroussi et al., 2015. See also Malanga-Georges Liboy and Michèle Vatz Laaroussi, "Opinion de la communauté anglophone sur l'immigration," *Cahiers de l'ÉDIQ* vol. 1, no. 2 (2011): 81-92. <https://www.ediq.ulaval.ca/publications/cahiers-de-lediq/cahiers-de-lediq-2011-vol-1-ndeg2>.

³³ For more on the factors that influence immigrant attraction and retention, especially in small cities and rural areas, see Victoria Esses and Charlie Carter, *Beyond the Big City: How Small Communities Across Canada Can Attract and Retain Newcomers*, Report, July 2019, <https://ppforum.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/BeyondTheBigCity-PPF-July2019-EN-1.pdf>. In addition, Victoria Esses et al. have also written on the concept of "welcoming communities" that facilitate the long-term integration of newcomers; see, for example, Victoria Esses, Leah Hamilton, Awish Aslam, and Priscila Ribeiro Prado Barros, *Measuring Welcoming Communities: A Toolkit for Communities and Those Who Support Them*, Pathways to Prosperity Partnership, 2023, 6, <http://p2pcanada.ca/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files/2023/03/Welcoming-Toolkit-I-Measuring-Welcoming-Communities.pdf>.

³⁴ Canada, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2015, p. 32.

³⁵ Vatz Laaroussi et al., 2015, p. 41.

Conclusion

English-speaking Quebec plays an important bridge role in welcoming newcomers and helping them integrate into the province's cultural, social, and economic life. Anglophone organizations support immigrants in the settlement process, help them build social networks, and foster English-French bilingualism. Despite limited funding and recognition, they have proven to be valuable partners in the provincial immigration ecosystem.

Research on immigration and ESCQ decreased considerably after 2018. New studies are needed to explore:

- the work of more recent Anglophone organizations dedicated to welcoming and settlement activities;
- the impact of the revised *Charter of the French language* on the Anglophone immigration sector;
- defining the ESCQ's approach to immigrant integration and the value it adds to the mainstream Francophone model;
- considering an immigration policy for English-speaking Quebec, inspired by the approach taken for Francophone minority communities outside the province, but adapted to Quebec's sociolinguistic context.³⁶

³⁶ To read the full text of the policy, https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/ircc/documents/pdf/english/corporate/publications-manuals/3658_politique-en-immigration-francophone_report_en.pdf. For more on the role that ESCQ can play in a federal immigration policy for official language minority communities, see QCGN's Brief to the Senate Standing Committee on Official Languages Study matters relating to Francophone immigration to minority communities, https://sencanada.ca/Content/Sen/Committee/441/OLLO/briefs/2023-01-30_OLLO_SS2_Brief_QCGN_e.pdf, as well as the transcript from the meeting of the Committee on January 30, 2023, <https://sencanada.ca/en/Content/Sen/Committee/441/OLLO/23EV-55963-E>.

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Credits for this Brief

Authors: Lina Shoumarova, MA, and Chedly Belkhodja, PhD

Management and production: Patrick Donovan, PhD

Content Revision: Patrick Donovan, PhD

Linguistic revision: Linda Arui

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

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