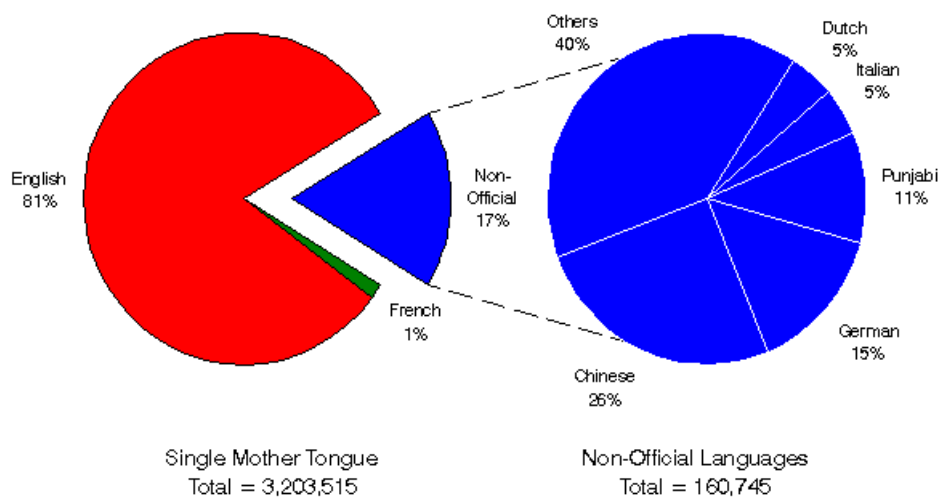


Issue 11: Mother Tongue

Produced by: Population Statistics Section

Data from the 1991 Census indicates that 81.6 per cent of the B.C. population reported English as their mother tongue,¹ 1.8 per cent reported French as their mother tongue, and 16.6 per cent reported their mother tongue is neither English nor French. While the number of British Columbians whose mother tongue includes English has increased from 2.4 million in 1986, to 2.7 million in 1991, the percentage of British Columbians whose mother tongue includes English has actually declined from 84.1 per cent in 1986, to 81.6 per cent in 1991.

B.C. Population by Mother Tongue - 1991
(Single Mother Tongue Only)



Source: 1991 Census

The decline in the proportion of the B.C. population whose mother tongue includes English has largely been due to recent high levels of immigration, and the fact that many B.C. immigrants do not speak either of Canada's official languages. Over the past two decades, the major source of B.C. immigrants has shifted from European to Asian countries. During the period from 1986 to 1991, 66.3 per cent of all B.C. immigrants came from Asia, and 48.6 per cent of all B.C. immigrants could not speak English.

¹ Mother tongue is defined as the first language a person learned at home in childhood and still understood at the time of the census.

The proportion of the B.C. population whose mother tongue is neither English nor French has increased from 16.6 per cent in 1986 to 19.1 per cent in 1991. Next to Ontario, B.C. has the second highest share of the Canadian population whose mother tongue is neither English nor French. In 1991, B.C.'s share of the Canadian population who could not speak either of the official languages was 15.3 per cent, while the province's share of the Canadian population was only 12.0 per cent.

Of British Columbians who reported one mother tongue, Chinese is most frequently spoken, next to English. Persons with Chinese as their only mother tongue account for 4.4 per cent of the B.C. population in the single mother tongue group, followed by German (2.5 per cent), Punjabi (1.8 per cent), and French (1.4 per cent).

More than seven per cent of all Canadians reported an aboriginal language as their mother tongue. There were a total of 13,665 persons in B.C. who reported their mother tongue included an aboriginal language. This represents 0.4 per cent of the B.C. population, and is a relative small proportion compared with other provinces such as Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

The proportion of the B.C. population who have only English as their mother tongue appears to decline with age. The proportion of the B.C. population whose only mother tongue is Chinese also appears to be higher in the middle age groups, and may be the result of the recent high influx of immigrants from Asia, particularly Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China.

Compared to the provincial average, the Vancouver Metropolitan Area has a slightly lower proportion of its population with English as the mother tongue (74.7 per cent vs. 81.6 per cent province wide). This is also the result of the inflow of recent non-English speaking immigrants who tend to settle in the Lower Mainland area of the province. More than 80 per cent of all the 1991 B.C. immigrants reported their intended destination to be the Vancouver area, while the Vancouver Census Metropolitan Area contains only 49 per cent of the provincial population.

Children whose parents' mother tongue is a non-official language also tend to have a non-official language as their only mother tongue. This may be due to the fact that parents are likely to pass on their mother tongue to their children even if their children were born in Canada. In addition, there have been many children whose mother tongue is neither English nor French immigrating with their parents. In 1991, 61.0 per cent of B.C. children and 58.6 per cent of Canadian children in this category reported a non-official language as their mother tongue.

Compared to the national average, B.C. has a higher proportion of husband-wife families in which the mother tongue of both the husband and the wife is neither English nor French (15.5 per cent for B.C. vs. 12.5 per cent for Canada). This is largely a result of the relatively higher immigrant population in the province. On the other hand, B.C. has a higher proportion of families with both the husband and the wife reporting English as their only mother tongue (69.5 per cent vs. 52.4 per cent). This is due to the relatively small proportion of the French speaking population in the province when compared to the rest of Canada. The per cent of husband-wife families where both reported French as their only mother tongue is 22 per cent for Canada and only 0.5 per cent for B.C.

Mother Tongue of Husband and Wife in Husband-Wife Families (Single Mother Tongue Group Only)

