A BMRC RESEARCH DIGEST
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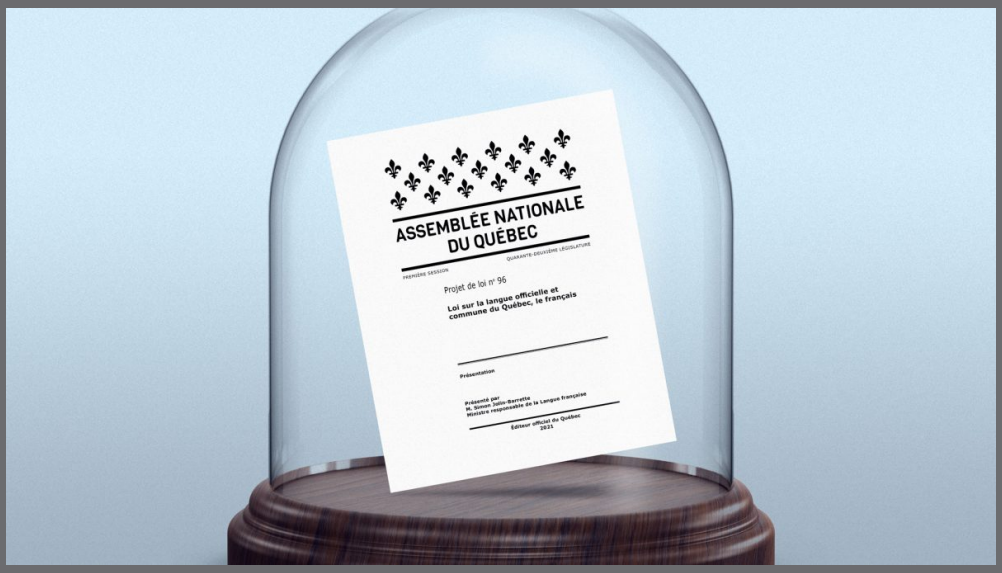
French Language Skills and Resilience among Quebec Asylum Seekers

New legislation poses an obstacle to social rights and integration



Source: L'Actualité

What you need to know

French is essential to full integration in Quebec. In a recent survey of asylum seekers, uptake of "francisation" courses was enthusiastic; 70% had participated in courses and 29% wanted to. Yet barriers to accessing French courses include: the need to work, ineligibility for subsidized daycare, and long waitlists. Bill 96 will improve access to francisation classes. But, it forbids public service from using languages other than French (or English in bilingual institutions) to communicate with newcomers who have been in Quebec more than 6 months, a serious threat to social rights and integration.

What is this research about?

The Settling in: Understanding the issues related to migration trajectory and integration among asylum seekers in Quebec" project documented the experiences of people who entered Quebec both regularly (official border crossing) and irregularly (ex. Roxham Rd) in 2017 and 2018. Triangulated data provided a detailed portrait of their settlement in Quebec and allowed us to assess asylum seekers' access to employment, housing, and children's education, as well as their use of community and public services that aim to support integration including: settlement services, daycare, language learning, and regionalization.

How was the research carried out?

The research was carried out in 2019-2021. There were 4 components of this multimethod project: (1) focus groups with settlement workers in Montreal and Montérégie, representatives of faith-based groups, and PRAIDA (Quebec's public agency serving asylum seekers) staff; (2) a survey of 324 asylum seekers; (3) semi-structured interviews with a subsample of survey participants; and (4) analysis of secondary data provided by: IRCC; the Quebec Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Solidarity; and the Immigration and Refugee Board. Participants had to be 18 years or older; have applied for asylum in Quebec in 2017 or 2018; and have lived in Quebec for at least 3 months.

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What have we learned from the research?

Our findings, focused on language and francisation in the settlement process of asylum seekers, document the strong resilience of asylum seekers, evident in their openness to learning French and their willingness to participate in and appreciation of the francisation programme. Nearly 30% speak French at home, and 60% consider themselves to have acceptable to excellent French skills after no more than two years in Quebec. Of the 70% of respondents who had taken a francisation course, nearly all (94%) wished they could have continued their studies. This positivity is an indicator of migrant resilience, (jobs, integration, etc)

However, our findings also reveal that despite this evidence of resilience and the high uptake of the French language, several access issues remain. In order to make francisation courses more accessible to asylum seekers, it would be important to allow this group to benefit from the same type of financial assistance (participation and childcare costs) currently granted only to permanent residents and citizens.

Lack of knowledge of French limits people's ability to exercise resilience, creating barriers to accessing information and services essential to their settlement. If they have not acquired an adequate command of French, they need linguistic support in order to be able to access these services. Bill 96 restricts public service providers to communicating with newcomers solely in French (in bilingual institutions) after 6 months' presence in Quebec, an unrealistic benchmark given the well-documented barriers to accessing courses and the way that various social locations and intersectional experiences can influence language learning. Rather than encouraging newcomers to learn French, Bill 96 is likely to contribute to a sense of social exclusion and the violation of a wide range of social rights.

How can you use this research?

Community stakeholders, academics and government policymakers can use this research to:

* Understand the motivations and objectives of asylum seekers in learning French in Quebec.

* Recognize their resilience in negotiating the multiple barriers to language learning

* Improve access to language courses by introducing improved financial support, ensuring access to daycare, and reducing wait times.

* Counter the introduction of measures such as the Bill 96 provisions restricting public service providers' ability to communicate with newcomers in their language

Who is leading this research?

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Learn more

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