

The French language in Canada: speaker density and language use, transmission and knowledge

International conference on territories of higher speaker density in minoritised language communities

October 16, 2025



Statistics
Canada

Statistique
Canada

Canada

Context

- Hundreds of languages are spoken in Canada, including more than 70 languages that are Indigenous to the country
- French and English are the official languages of Canada
 - French and English have official status at the federal level, in the province of New Brunswick, and in the territories
 - French is the sole official language in the province of Quebec
- French speakers are in a minority situation
 - In provinces and territories other than Quebec
 - In Canada as a whole

Objectives of the presentation

How does use, transmission and knowledge of French vary according to the local concentration of French speakers?

- Retention and adoption of French as a home language
- Occurrence of mixed-language couples
- Transmission of French from parents to children
- Knowledge of French as a second language

Is the relation between speaker concentration and indicators different in Quebec and outside Quebec?



Some language concepts from the Canadian census



Mother tongue

First language that was learned in childhood, before attending school, and that is still understood at the time of the census



Home language

Languages spoken at home and the frequency at which they are spoken

- Main home language (spoken most often)
- Secondary home language (spoken on a regular basis, but not most often)



Knowledge of languages

Capacity to conduct a conversation in a language

The French language in Canada: trends over time

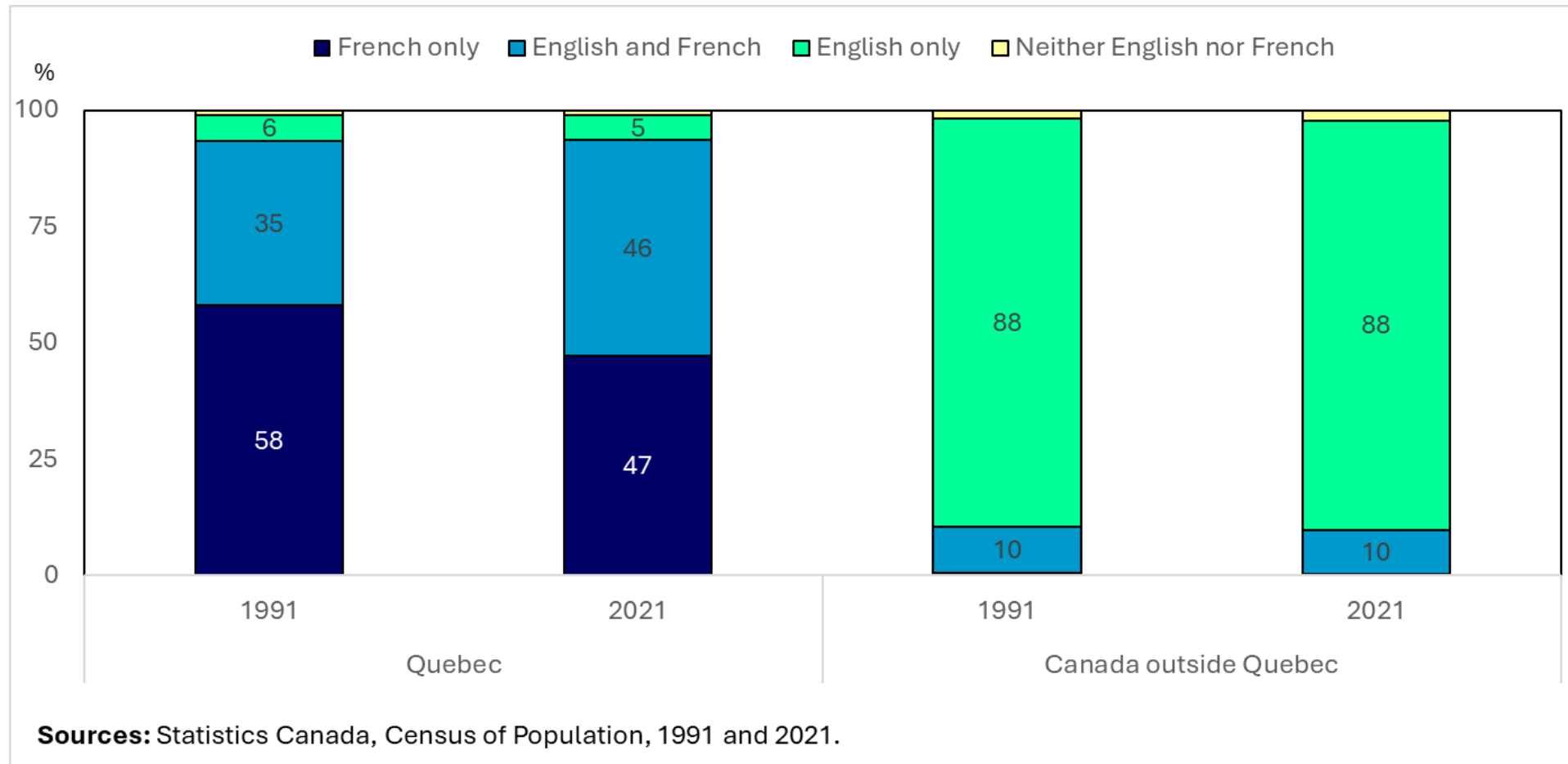


Statistics
Canada

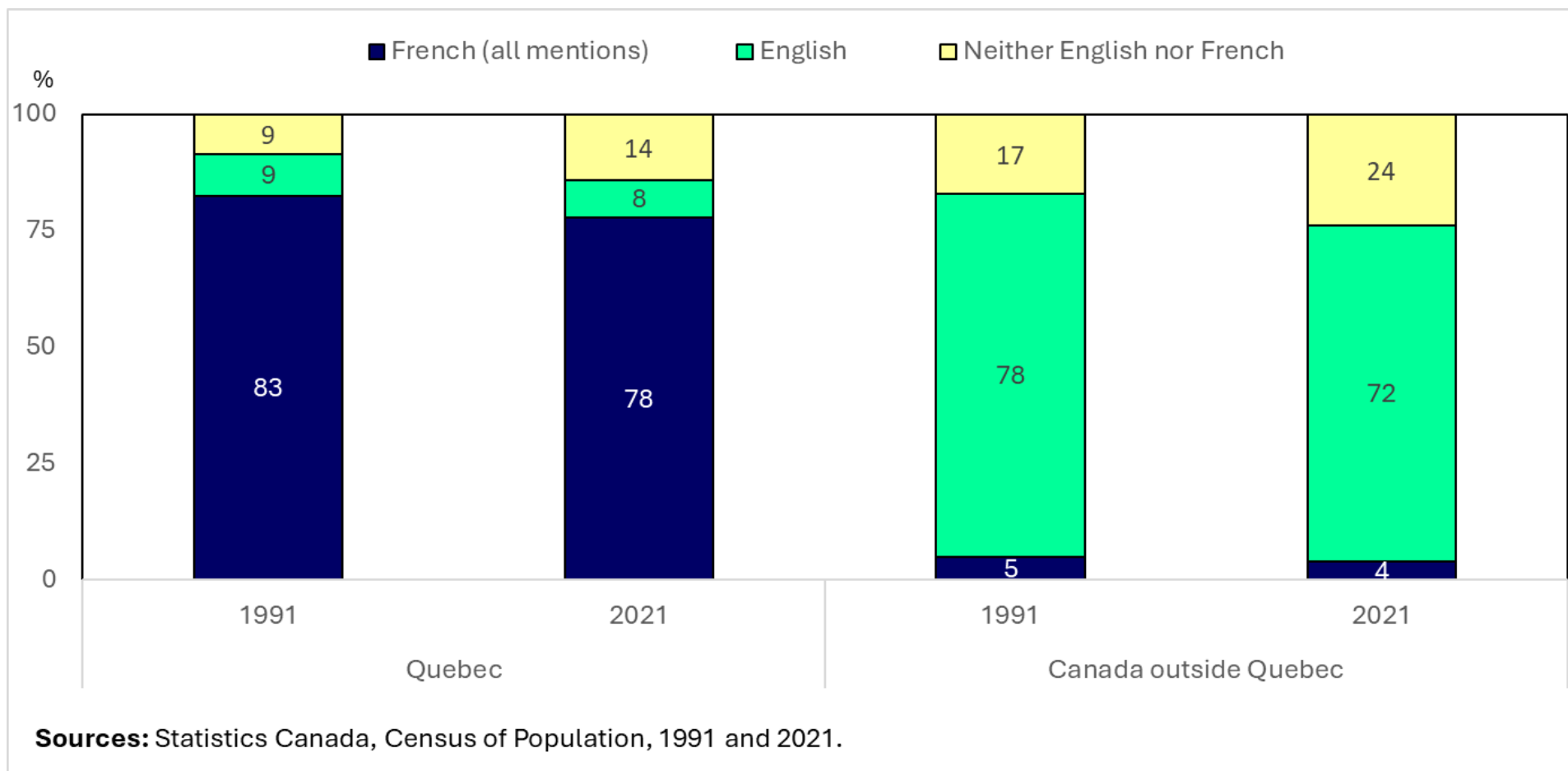
Statistique
Canada

Canada

Knowledge of French and English



Mother tongues



Why is the relative proportion of the French-mother-tongue population decreasing?

- Aging population
- Historical underrepresentation of French speakers in international migration
- Outside Quebec, shift towards English as a main home language and incomplete transmission of French from parents to children
 - Higher rates of transmission in monolingual families, as well as in mixed-language families in which the mother has French as a mother tongue or can conduct a conversation in French
 - While parent-level factors are strongly related to the likelihood of transmission, ecological factors are also positively associated with transmission, including the local-level concentration of the French-mother-tongue population

Local-level distribution of the French-mother-tongue population

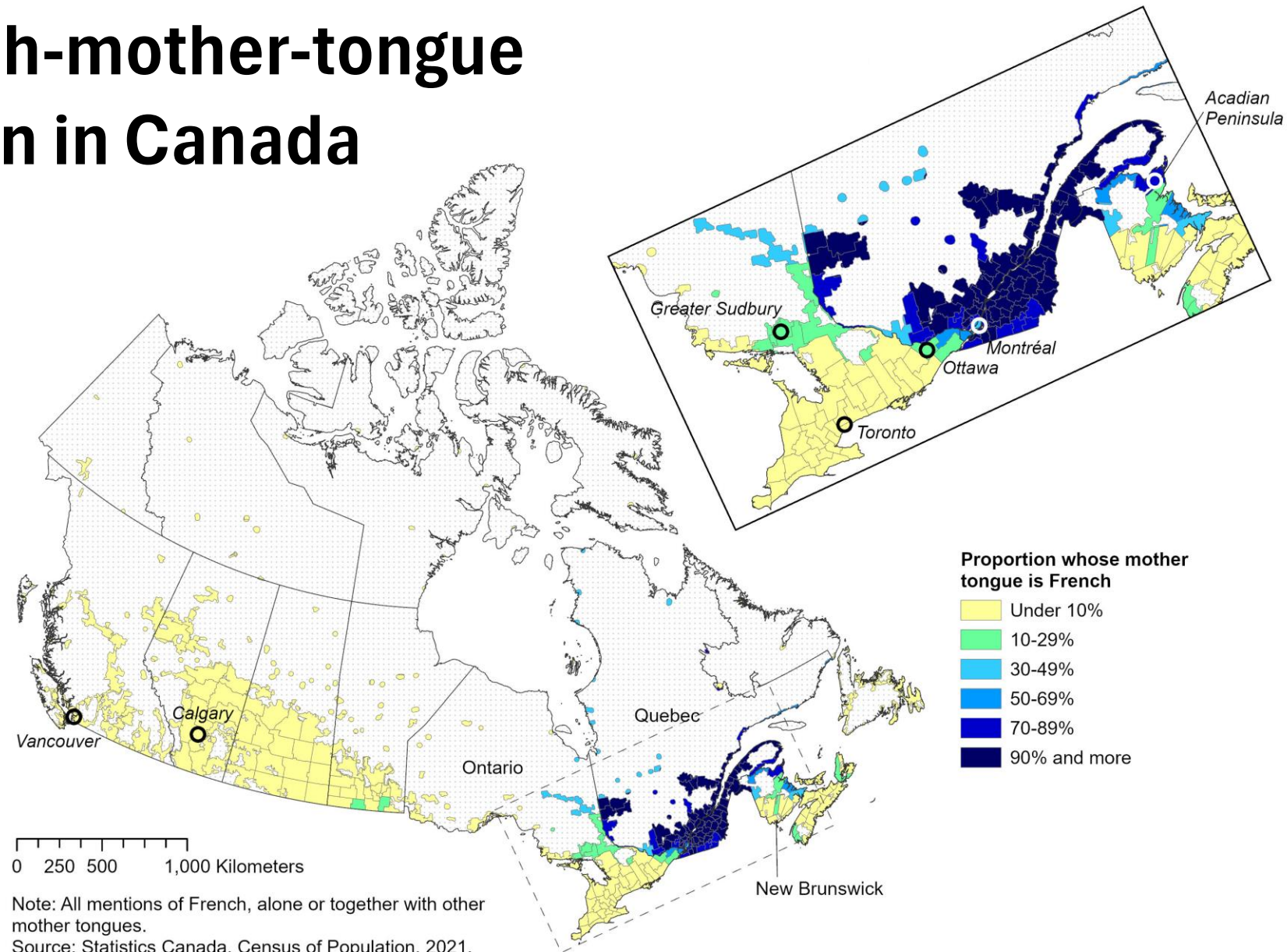


Statistics
Canada

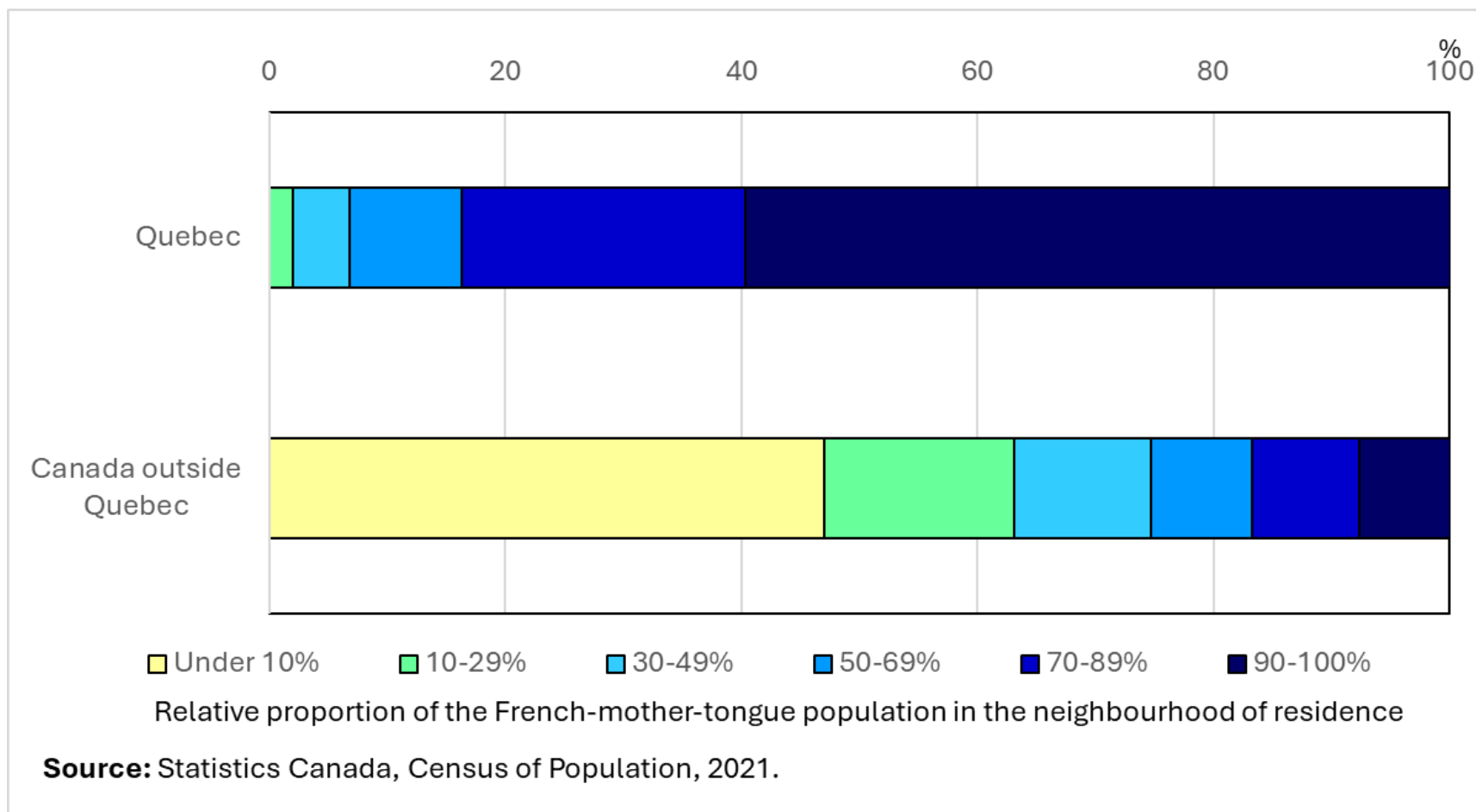
Statistique
Canada

Canada

The French-mother-tongue population in Canada in 2021



Distribution of the French-mother-tongue population by its neighbourhood-level demographic weight, 2021



Relationship between local-level concentration and the use, transmission and knowledge of French

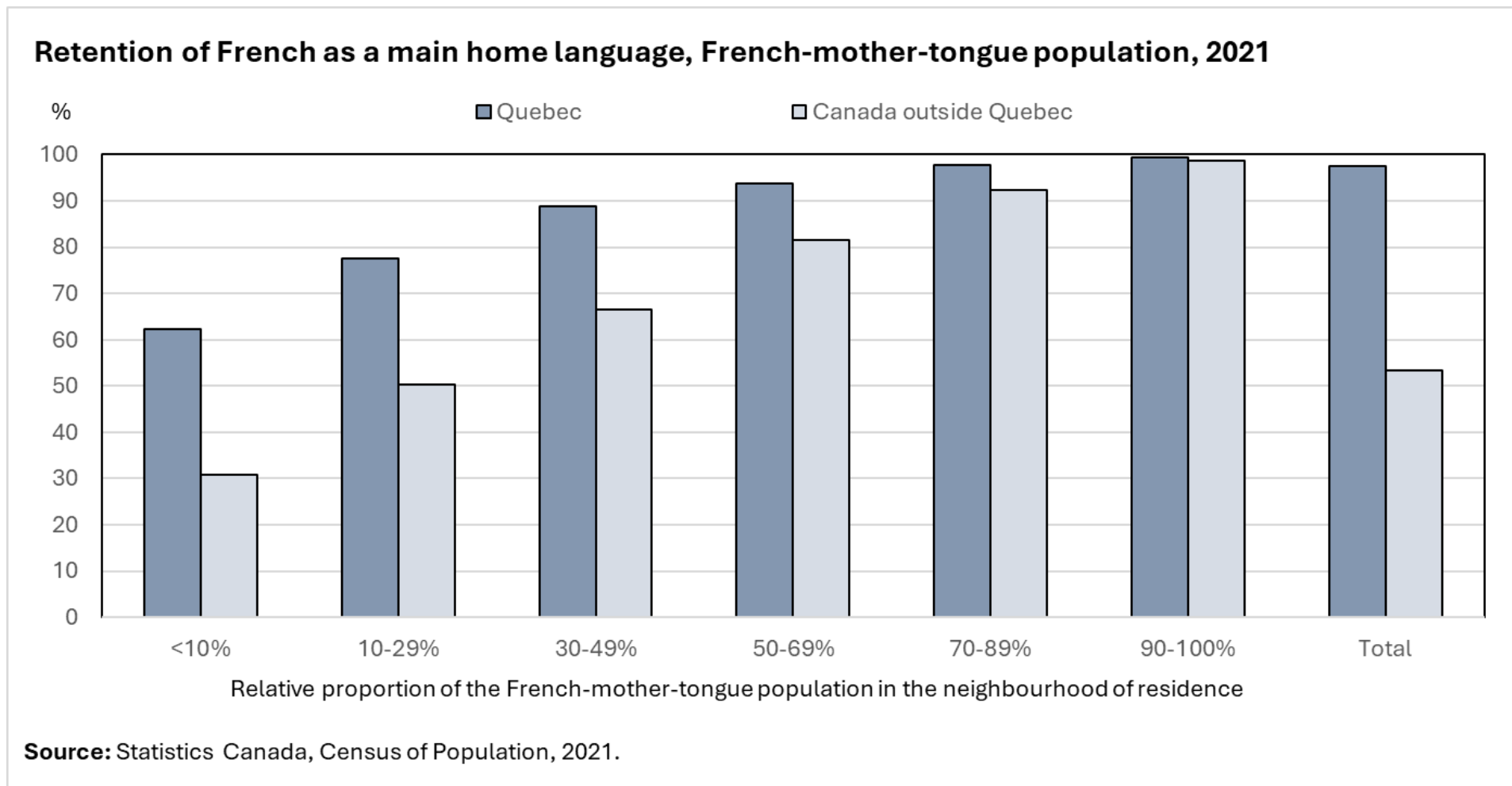


Statistics
Canada

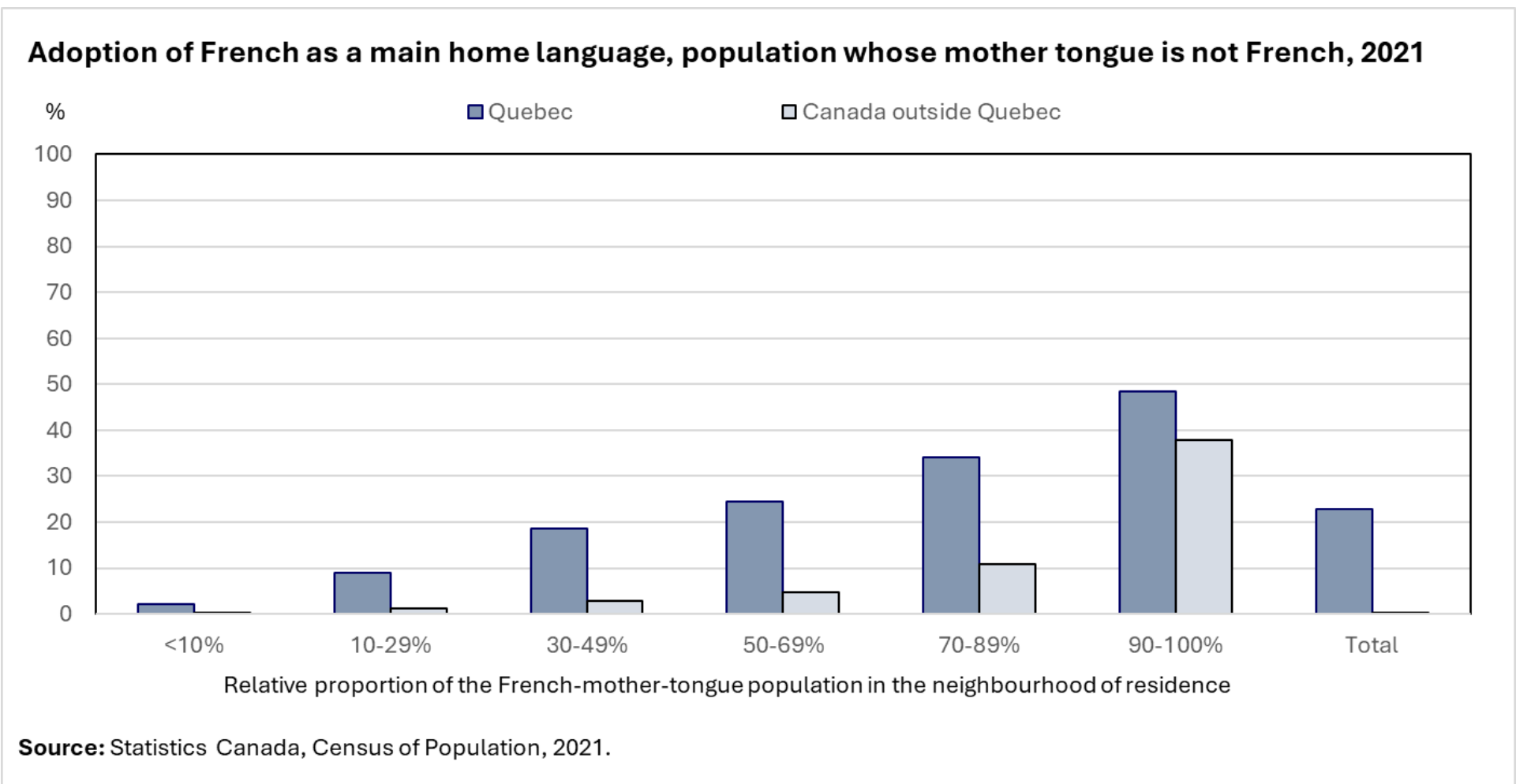
Statistique
Canada

Canada

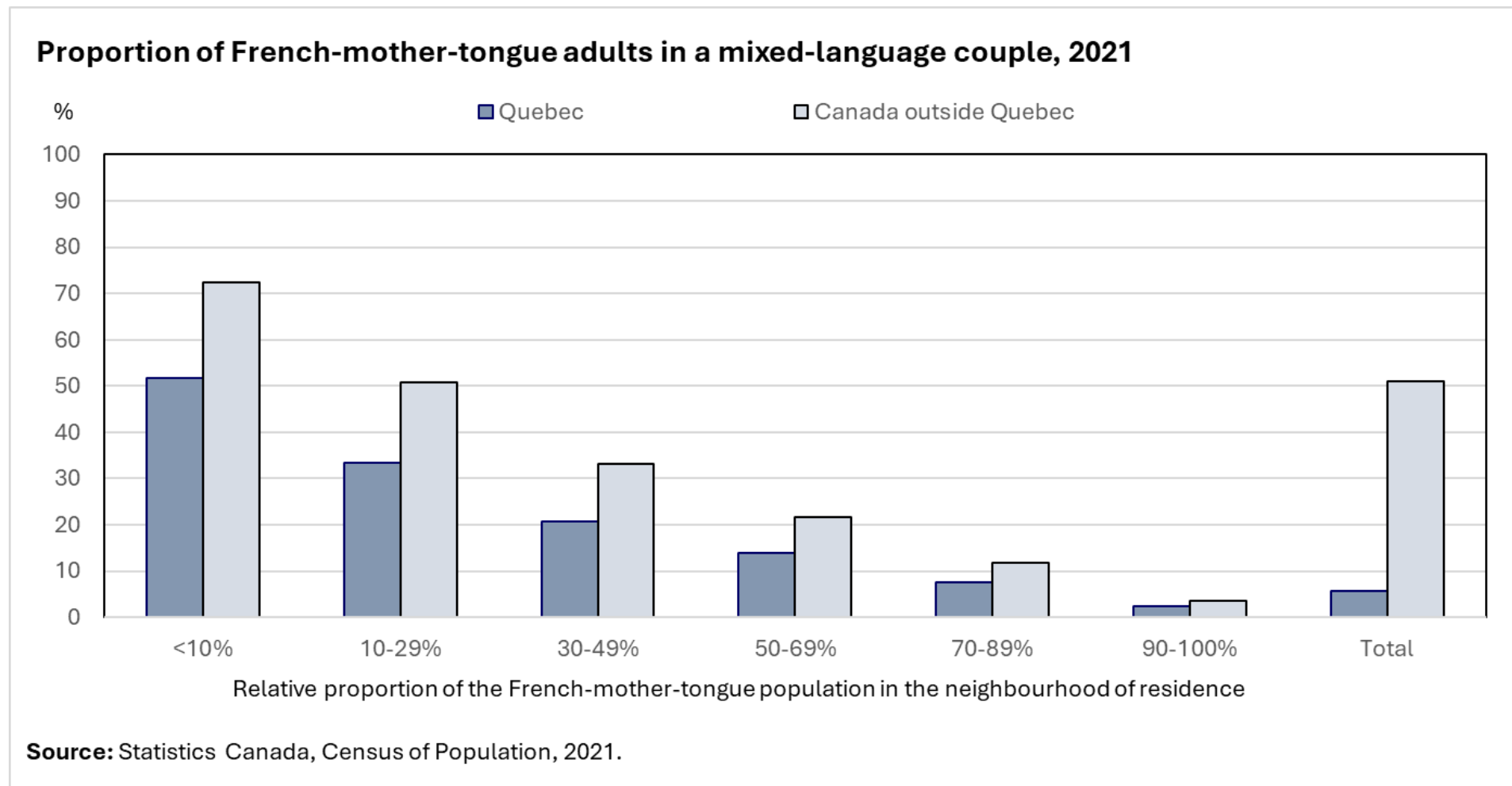
Retention of French as a main home language



Adoption of French as a main home language

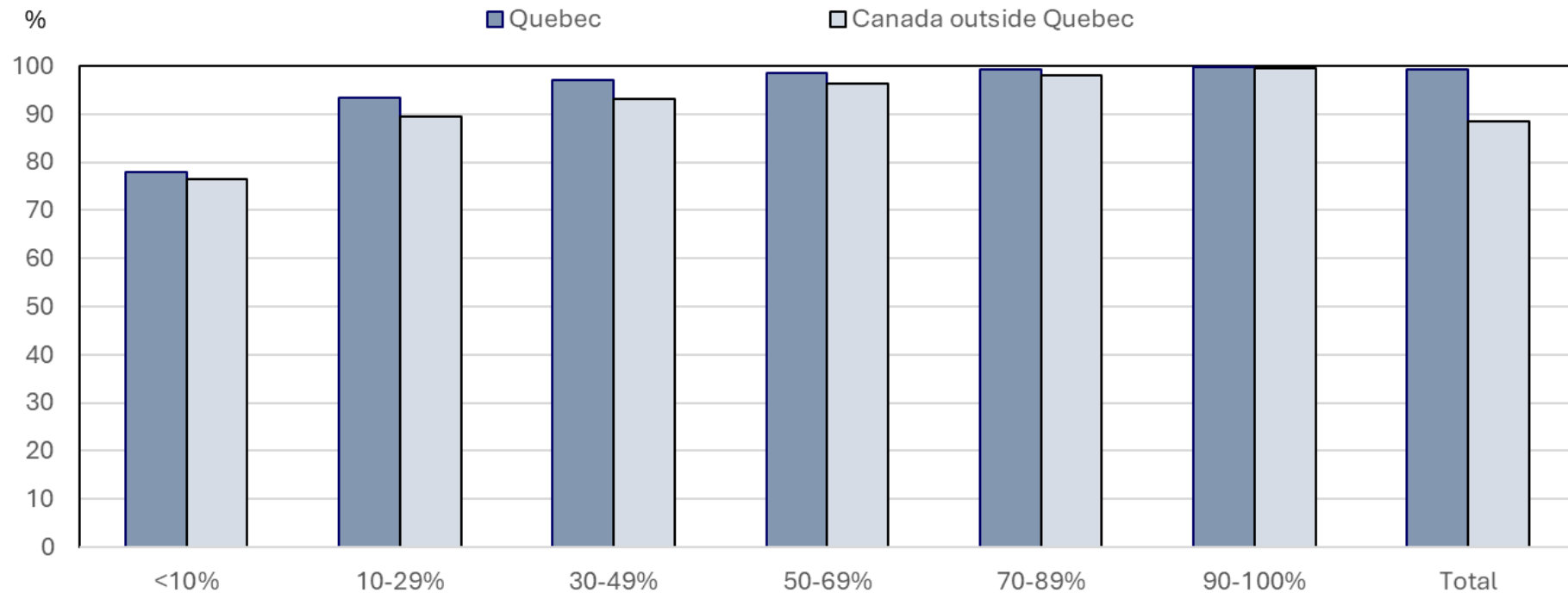


Occurrence of mixed-language couples



Transmission in monolingual families

Transmission of French from parents to children in monolingual families, 2021

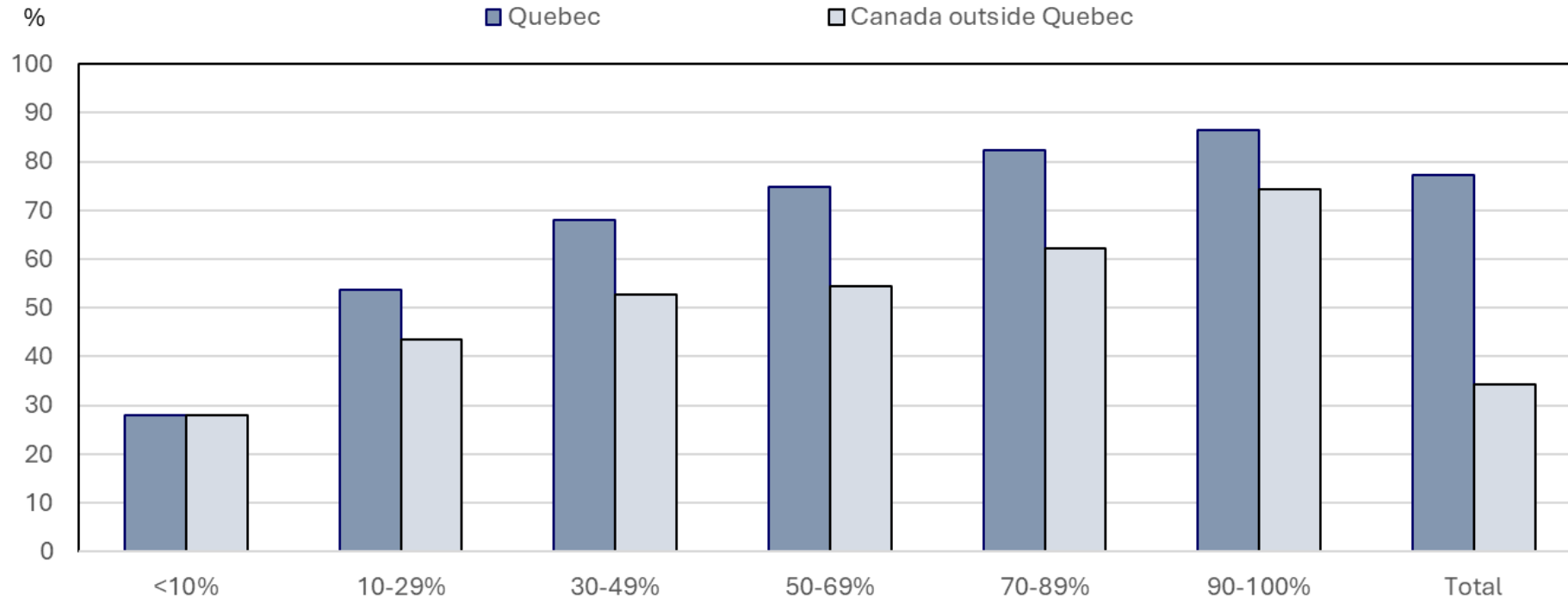


Note: Proportion of children aged under 18 years who have French as their mother tongue, among children who lived with two French-mother-tongue parents at the time of the census.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Transmission in mixed-language families

Transmission of French from parents to children in mixed-language families, 2021



Relative proportion of the French-mother-tongue population in the neighbourhood of residence

Note: Proportion of children aged under 18 years who have French as their mother tongue, among children who lived with one French-mother-tongue parent and one parent with another mother tongue at the time of the census.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

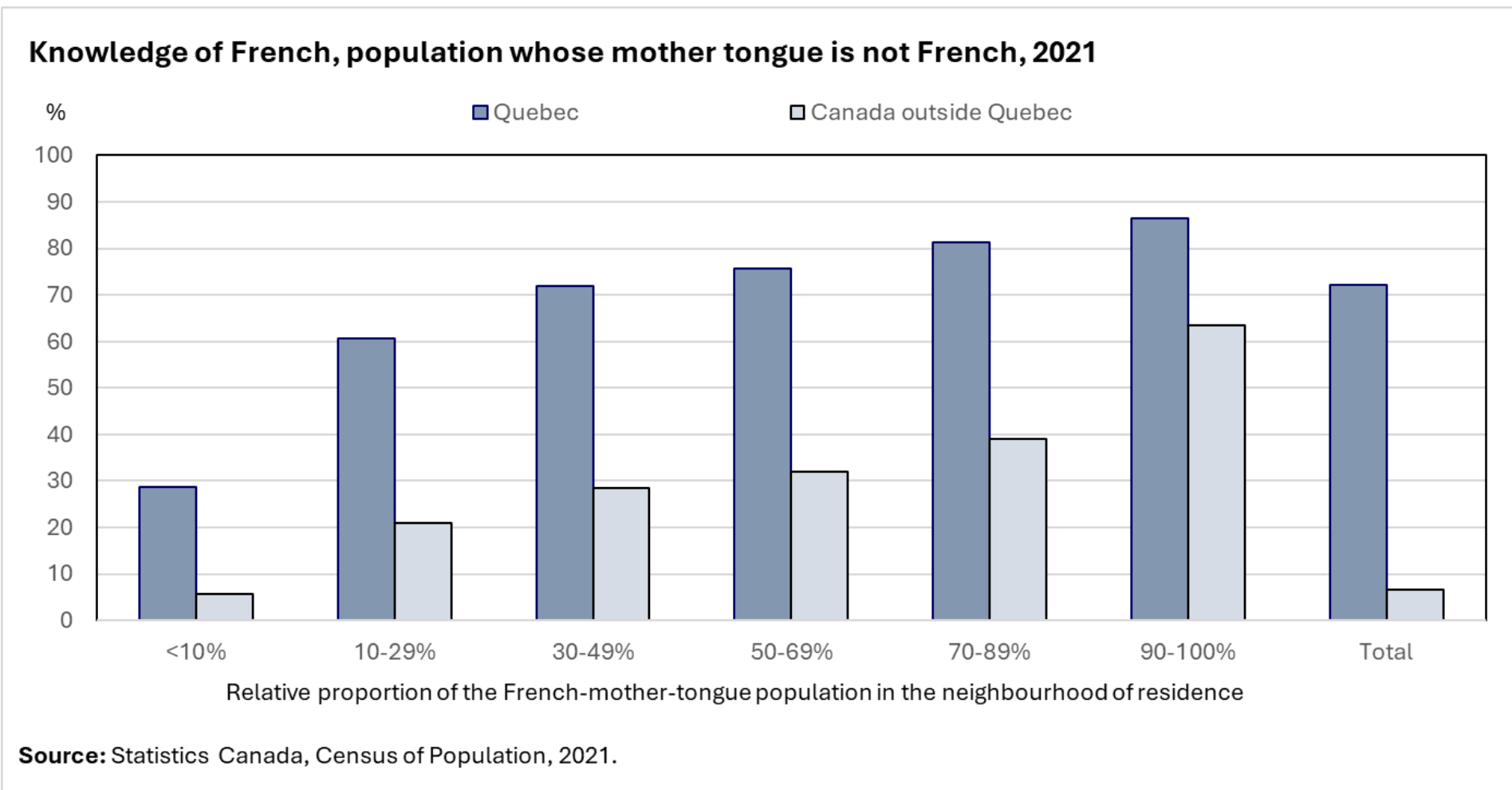


Statistics
Canada

Statistique
Canada

Canada

Knowledge of French as a second language



Conclusion

- The concentration of French speakers at the neighbourhood level is associated with the use, transmission and knowledge of French both in Quebec and outside Quebec
 - We cannot infer causality
- While a minority language nationwide, the majority status of French in Quebec is reflected in the results
- Other indicators available in the Canadian census (i.e., language of work, language of instruction) or in the Survey on the official language minority population (i.e., use of language in the public sphere, when accessing services) could warrant further exploration
- **Contact Statistics Canada's language statistics program**
statcan.languagestats-statlinguistique.statcan@statcan.gc.ca

