

## Opportunities and Lessons Learned from a Retrospective Analysis of Administrative Billing Data to Understand the Linguistic Profile of High-Risk Close Contacts of COVID-19 Cases in Ontario

### OBJECTIVE and BACKGROUND:

This study explores how administrative billing data for language interpretation services can be used to better understand the linguistic needs of individuals identified as high-risk close contacts during the COVID-19 pandemic in Ontario.

In a context where certain communities have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, access to reliable linguistic data is crucial to ensure equitable and responsive public health communication. The authors analyzed interpretation requests made as part of Public Health Ontario's Contact Tracing Initiative (2020-2022) and compared the observed trends with regional language profiles from the 2021 Canadian Census.

### KEY RESULTS:

- 2,604 interpretation requests totaling 38,518 minutes, covering 50 languages.
- The top five languages were French, Arabic, Spanish, Punjabi, and Mandarin (69.2% of interpretation time).
- Median times ranged from 7 minutes (French) to 13.5 minutes (Arabic).
- Temporal variations:
  - Distinct periods of predominance: Spanish (Spring 2020 & Spring-Summer 2021), French (September 2020 & Fall-Winter 2021), Arabic (Winter 2020-Spring 2021).
  - Some trends reflected the linguistic profiles of regions with high volumes of submissions (e.g., Ottawa for French, Peel for Punjabi and Arabic).
  - In other cases (e.g., increase in Spanish), the demand for interpretation did not match census data, suggesting a disproportionate impact on certain communities.

### INTERPRETATIONS:

- Analysis of secondary administrative data can complement primary data and reveal linguistic needs not otherwise captured.
- The periods when Arabic and Spanish were overrepresented indicate that certain language communities have suffered a disproportionate impact from the pandemic, consistent with other racial and socioeconomic data.
- The differences in interpretation duration (longer for some languages such as Arabic) highlight that interpretation is not limited to literal translation, but also involves cultural mediation.
- The study shows that language needs evolve over time and across regions, which must be taken into account in public health communication strategies.

### POLICY CONSIDERATIONS:

- **Strengthening data collection and use** : Governments should systematically integrate the analysis of secondary data (such as interpretation service billings) to quickly identify language needs during health crises.
- **Equity in access to information** : Develop targeted communication strategies for communities that are not always visible in censuses but are vulnerable in crisis situations (e.g., Spanish-speaking communities).
- **Proactive planning** : Integrate regional language profiles into public health emergency preparedness to ensure that essential information is accessible to all populations, including linguistic minorities.

For more information, see:

Chambers A, Cachia MA, Hopkins JP. Opportunities and lessons learned from a retrospective analysis of administrative billing data to understand the language profile of high-risk close contacts of COVID-19 cases in Ontario. *Can Commun Dis Rep* 2024;50(10):375–80. <https://doi.org/10.14745/ccdr.v50i10a06>

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This brief was developed in partnership with the Ontario SPOR Support Unit Francophone Initiative. Visit us at <https://savoirmontfort.ca/initiative-francophone/>

*This text was written with the support of OpenAI's ChatGPT tool for the synthesis and writing of scientific content.*