

Minorities in Montréal

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The following essay provides a rough overview of the ethnic, social, and religious minorities in Montréal. Source: www.unac.org/ready/en/research/Minorities_in_Montreal.pdf (United Nations Association in Canada)

I. Ethnic Minorities

1. Introduction

Montréal prides itself on being a melting pot of many ethnic backgrounds: currently 30% of the population is international. However, it is more accurately related to the situation as a salad bowl of ethnic groups because different people interact with each other but still maintain their own cultural uniqueness.

Montréal's immigrants have arrived at different points in time. Thus, the socio-economic background, language proficiency, and educational as well as occupational skills *within* a ethnic group may vary considerably. The lack of economic and social capital forces recent immigrated people to live in the poorer areas of the city. Due to their financial issues they are often not able to carry the costs of child care or transportation to community meetings. Thus, financial concerns pose another problem to a successful partaking in Montréal's social life. Furthermore, profound differences in cultures and traditions *between* ethnic groups often obstruct participation in community. Language problems are the most immediate obstacle to overcome in order to be able to participate.

Understanding and accommodating the deeper psychological and cultural differences of ethnic groups members as well as overcoming the given financial and linguistic obstacles are the major challenges of getting citizens to work together effectively toward common goals like an ongoing inter-cultural dialogue.

2. Three biggest ethnic minorities in Montreal: French, Italian, and Irish

1. 2.1 French

According to the 2001 census, 900,000 French people live in Montréal. Due to the Francophone background of Quebec, people of French descent are not viewed as an ethnic minority since they share the same language and culture with the largest ethnic group in Montréal, the Francophone Canadians. (Montréal is the 2nd largest francophone city in the

world after Paris.) That is why, French in Montréal usually do not experience disadvantages due to their background. They are geographically well integrated and do not live in particular neighbourhoods although they are more commonly situated in the West of the city.

French immigrants as well as French Canadians from the urban area of Montréal have expressed doubts about federal multiculturalism policy since its initiation. Some of them consider multiculturalism as an attempt to weaken the French position in Canada. Thus, immigrants from France and other French-speaking areas of the world are generally seen as a strengthening component for the Francophone group in Montréal.

1. 2.2 Italian

There are estimated 250,000 Italian inhabitants in Montréal. They live more concentrated than the other European minorities, thus, there are several areas in Montréal considered as Italian communities, e.g., Little Italy and Lasalle. Compared to the French and the Irish, Italians tend to live very family-centered, having the least community organization. However, they maintain a well-developed informal business alliance. Nevertheless, the Italian community is divided by regional affiliations: the regional dialects, spoken by Italians informally, are often incomprehensible to those from other Italian regions. To ensure both health care and welfare for themselves, the Italians joined the available Catholic organizations and did not develop their own social infra-structures. Although Italian is the third most spoken language in the city, the immigration of Italians has dropped since the mid-seventies.

1. 2.3. Irish

Contrary to the Italians, Irish immigrants established their own schools, churches, and hospitals, especially in the working class neighbourhoods such as Point St. Charles and Griffintown. There are around 161,000 Irish people living in the Montréal area, about 78,175 (48.5%) of them speak English. The others assimilated into the French-speaking majority population. Irish culture and community institutions are chiefly supported by the English-speaking population. The most important Irish cultural festivity is the St. Patrick's Day: Irish citizens in Montréal celebrate it with an annual parade. This parade has been held since 1824 and is very popular with Montréal's citizens from various ethnic backgrounds. Thus, the parade can be viewed as an important contribution to positive inter-cultural relations between the English- and French speaking people in Montréal that also strengthens the Irish bonds with other ethnic groups.

3. The British, Haitian, Greek and German minorities in Montréal

1. 3.1 British

The British minority should be subdivided into the English and Scottish groups. An estimated 140,000 people of English descent currently live in Montréal. Their number declined from 10.96% in 1996 to 9.34% in 2001. They inhabit mainly the Western part of the city, e.g. Westmount. An interaction between the Scottish and English group may occur at church, in professional meetings, in sport and voluntary activities. Although the British ethnic groups are fully integrated in the Montréal community, they still experience resentments from the French. Subtle tensions are rooted in historic reasons that go back to the violent conflicts between French and British settlers during the 17th and 18th century. Furthermore, there were also political rivalries between these two groups during the second half of the 20th century. Nevertheless, the English and French have coexisted peacefully in the last few decades, although there are not many cultural organizations and institutions which foster English-French understanding and inter-cultural cooperation.

1. 3.2 Haitian

The majority of Haitians who immigrate to Canada settle down in Montréal. At the beginning of the 1990s, Montréal faced serious racial tensions after the fatal shooting of an unarmed black father, Marcelus Francois, by the police. During the 1990s, especially Haitian pupils experienced serious problems at schools, teachers reported that the children had been reluctant to participate in certain lesson activities. Social problems like these required action on political and cultural level. Thus, there are ongoing projects and recurring events which aim on promotion of tolerance and social sensitivity between the Haitian minority and the other ethnic groups in Montréal, e.g., Montréal's participation in the International Creole Day (last time in 2001). Although the racial tensions of the 1990s faded, Haitian and other ethnic groups in Montréal mainly cohabit but do not mingle culturally with each other, e.g., the Atwater area of West Central Montréal brings English-speaking Quebecers together with Haitian Quebecers for socio-economic rather than cultural or linguistic reasons. Roughly a half of Haitian immigrants are women, a large majority of whom are in working class positions. A significant number of Haitians work in office and sales jobs. There is no big business Haitian class in Montréal. However, many small enterprises have developed: restaurants, outlets for Haitian products, travel agencies, and others. The high number of crimes committed by Haitian juveniles is a problem linked to poverty, the failure to graduate from school, promiscuity, and a high proportion of single-parent families (60% in several working-class Montreal

neighbourhoods). The consequences are violent confrontations, in which youth groups of Haitian or Jamaican origin fight for possession and dominance.

1. 3.3 Greek

Judged on grounds of several empirical studies like this of Efrosini Gavaki, the Greek community in Montréal consists of strong cultural bonds: 59% of Greek immigrants chose Greek as their primary-language-at-home, whereas for the Greek community in Toronto it was 38%. The Greeks succeeded in establishing community organizations in Montréal and thus maintain strong cultural links to their mother country. Though not having as extensive a network as the Jews, the Greek community is more unified than the Haitian and German minority. Nevertheless, the Greek minority does not have any particular problems with other ethnic groups in Montréal and do participate in inter-cultural dialogue, e.g. through events like the annual festival launched by the Hellenic Community of Montréal. The Greek minority faces some inter-generational conflicts: while young Greek immigrants tend to be willing to assimilate, older Greeks prefer to interact exclusively with people from the same ethnic minority.

1. 3.4 German

There are about 83,000 Montréal inhabitants with German roots. Different than the earlier mentioned groups, the Germans do not concentrate in particular groups or areas of Montréal. However, due to institutions like the Goethe-Institute or the Humboldt-Schule there is a well developed German community in Montréal. However, the German minority in Montréal can not be described as a sub-society since it does not tend to have a strong autonomy and common affairs. German immigrants are almost never exposed to racial mistreatment which may be the result of a successful assimilation to Montréal's culture.

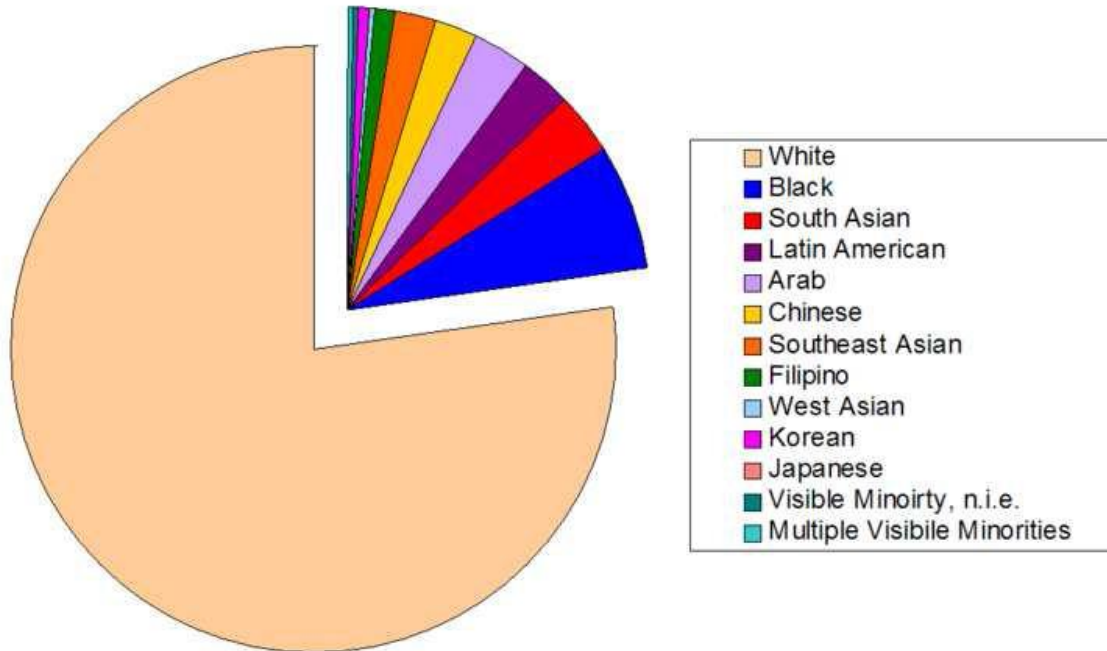
II. Visible minorities

2.1 Introduction

Since 1980s, the majority of immigrants coming to Montréal are from less economically developed countries. They belong to the so-called visible minorities: Blacks, South Asians, Chinese, Latinos, and Central Americans. Of 1.8 million immigrants who arrived between 1991 and 2001, 58% came from Asia (including the Middle East), 11.5% from the Caribbean, Central and South America, 8% from Africa, 20% are from Europe and 3% arrived from the United States.

Distribution of Ethnic Groups – Statistics:

Visible Minorities of Montreal



Pie chart of visible minorities in Montreal.

2.2 Asian minority

Although the Asian minority in general is considered to be well-integrated, there are some social problems: e.g., several Asian cultural organizations in Montréal criticized the Quebec government for generally ignoring cultural events fostered or run by members of ethnic minorities instead of supporting them. Events like the Montréal Asian Heritage Festival are supposed to enhance inter-cultural dialogue by presentations, forums, discussions, tributes, etc. However, the Asian minority in past years faced problems financing it. There are several Asian-Montréal networks, e.g., the Montréal-Persian and the Chinese- Montréal connections which support the integration and cultural dialogue between people of Asian descent and other Montréal inhabitants. Of all Asian immigrants the Chinese minority is the largest with almost 45,000 people. Juvenile delinquency poses a problem within the Chinese community and is blamed on a misdistribution of opportunities and social imbalances. Repeated disadvantages for Asian minorities arise from the lack of language skills, social networks, occupational skills, and economic resources. They limit the immigrants' settlement to ethnic enclaves: discrimination in

both housing and labour markets forces them into specific neighbourhoods of Montréal, and thus increase their concentration and segregation from other citizens.

2.3 Arabic minority

Arabs are the second largest visible minority in Montréal. Furthermore, the city is home to the largest Arab community in Canada. According to the 2001 census, 56,000 native Arabic people live in the area of Montréal. Especially the Concordia University is popular with students of Arab origin: an estimated one-quarter of the students are Muslims. Due to their pro-Palestinian politics on the campus, the Arab commune in Montréal was confronted with tensions with the Jewish and pro-Israel population, since Montréal also has one of Canada's largest Jewish communities. However, Islam is the third most commonly practiced religion in Montréal. There are on-going efforts to improve the Arab integration and relations especially with Jewish citizens: projects like the Israel-Palestine Dialogue Group aim on inter-cultural approach.

III. Religious minority

Jewish minority

Jews are residentially the biggest and most concentrated religious minority group in Montréal. Jewish community encompasses about 93,000 according to the 2001 census. However, the Jewish community is not a unitary group but consists of several different Jewish ethnic divisions which experience different circumstances and living conditions. The biggest group in Montréal consists of Jews from European countries (Ashkenazim) who arrived mainly between 1938 and 1950. The French speaking Jews, mostly from the Middle East and Northern Africa (Mizrahim) have come predominantly from former French colonies. Spanish Jews (Sephardim) (but also Ashkenazim who had formerly lived Britain) and then settled down in Montréal in the 18th century. Most recent arrivals include significant numbers of Russian as well as French Jews. (French is the mother tongue of almost 25% of the Jewish population in Montréal.)

The Jewish minority formed its own health and welfare system. These institutions work efficiently due to the fact that the Montréal Jews are least divided internally by religious or regional variances. However, due to the strong inner bonds, the Jewish minority rarely intermingles culturally with other ethnic groups. The incorporation of Jewish communities in the municipal society and its institutions often seems impossible, especially among the orthodox Jews in Outremont which shut themselves off from other Montréal citizens. The community

faces the common problem of ethnic, social, and religious minorities: they cohabit with the Montréal's population but generally avoid an intercultural dialogue.

IV. Homosexual Minority in Montréal

Montréal is known as a generally homosexual-friendly metropolis, especially after the adoption of the Declaration of Montreal on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Human Rights in July 2006. The Declaration guarantees a number of rights and freedoms concerning the homosexual, transgender, and bisexual minority, e.g., prevention of discrimination in healthcare, education, and immigration. Montréal has been worldwide renowned for its spirit of openness and tolerance between the general public and the whole gay community since 2002, when the Québec government adopted Bill #32, which gave same-sex partners the same rights and obligations as heterosexual partners. However, it hasn't always been this way: Montreal's homosexual community has developed over the years through protests, political engagement, and ongoing awareness rising campaigns. The homosexual community residentially congregated in the gay village, east from downtown.

V. Conclusions / Aspects for further consideration:

Since integration is perceived at various levels (spatial, political, cultural, economic, etc.), it is difficult to evaluate the amalgamation of ethnic groups in Montréal. The capacity to act collectively towards common goals is measured by political and cultural institutions.

Furthermore, Montréal's multiculturalism policies aim to achieve minority integration while enabling them to preserve their heritage. Promotion of cultural diversity may stress differences rather than similarities. This author considers these aspects as important for integrating minorities into cooperative environments:

- Fostering integration in schools and learning institutions
- Media portrayal/ influence
- Cultural preservation and intercultural sharing