Understanding the Experiences of Spoken-Language Interpreters in Canada

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Background

- Interpreters are essential to providing fair and equitable access to public services across Canada.[1]
- Canada faces an increased demand for interpretation services with rising immigration and linguistic diversity.[2]
- There is an insufficient number of trained interpreters in Canada to meet that demand, placing increased stress on Canada's (largely) freelance interpreters workforce.[3]
- In 2024, 27,435 youth under 18 years old made up for 16% of asylum claims in Canada, while 41% of all claimants reported knowing neither official language (i.e., English or French).[4,5]
- Little is known about interpreters in Canada, including:
  - Their work contexts and experiences;
  - Their qualifications and training; and
  - Their access to support and resources for interpreters.

Purpose

Identify the work experiences, training, resources, and supports available to and wanted by Canadian spoken-language interpreters working in legal contexts

Methods

Procedure & Questionnaire

- Distributed an online survey to spoken-language interpreters across Canada via publicly accessible contact information
- Screened for experience working within forensic and/or legal contexts (e.g., court/legal aid clinic; Immigration and Refugee Board, police interviews)
- Compensated with a $20 gift card for their time
- Used Multiple Choice, Likert Scale, and Open-Ended Questions

Participants

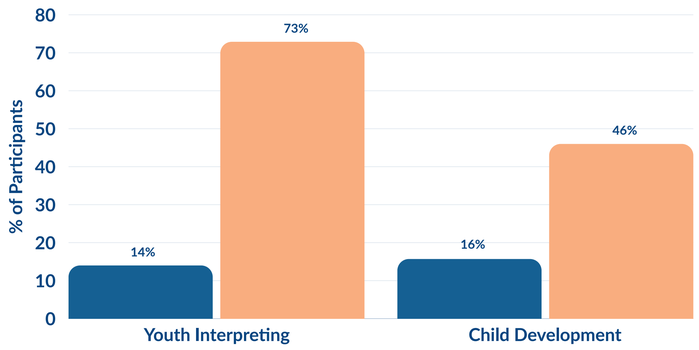
- *N* = 71
- M_{age} = 33.75 (*SD* = 14.12)
- Female, *n* = 49 (69%)
- Years Experience = 14.17 (*SD* = 6.41)
- Ethnicity
  - White, *n* = 20 (28%)
  - South Asian, *n* = 17 (24%)
  - Middle Eastern, *n* = 12 (17%)
  - East Asian, *n* = 11 (16%)

Work Contexts & Experiences

- Interpreted Languages (Most Frequent), 45 unique languages
  - Spanish, n = 16; Mandarin/Chinese, n = 12; Russian, n = 9; Arabic, n = 9; Punjabi, n = 7
- Geographic Work Distribution
  - Ontario, *n* = 47 (66%); Alberta, *n* = 14 (20%); BC, *n* = 6 (9%)
  - New Brunswick, Saskatchewan, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut were unrepresented.
- Primary Sectors Worked In
  - Legal or court proceedings (non-immigration), *n* = 29 (45%)
  - Immigration & Refugee Hearings (e.g., asylum), *n* = 12 (19%)
- Education
  - Undergraduate, *n* = 24 (34%); Masters, *n* = 37 (52%)

Results

Training on Vulnerable Populations

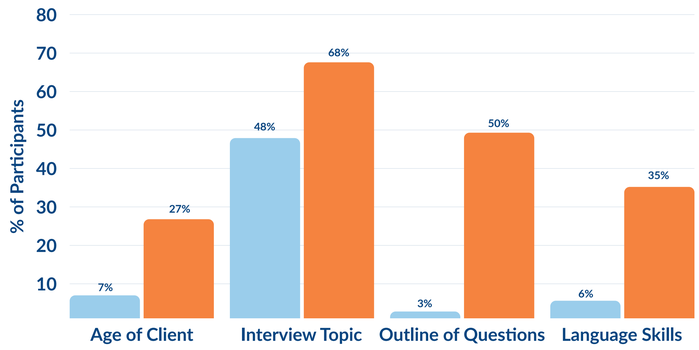


Interpreters reported **infrequently interpreting for children** under 12 (*n* = 49, 77%) **and adolescents**, aged 12 to 17 (*n* = 29, 45%).

However, they believe **training on interpreting with youth (under 18) and child development generally would be useful**!

- Training Received by Interpreters
- Training Perceived as Useful to Have

Access to Information Prior to Assignments

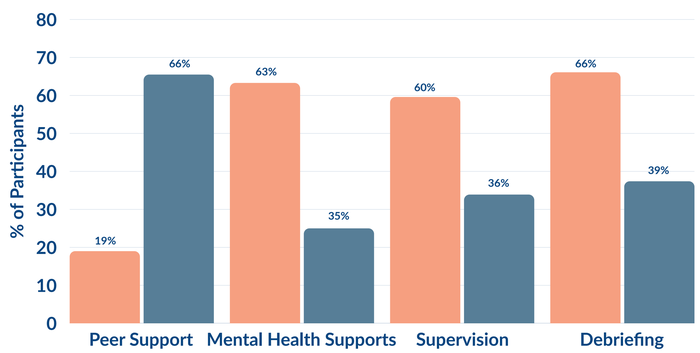


Interpreters reported ***rarely* receiving information** prior to interpretation assignments (*n* = 22; 31%).

Interpreters reported **wanting to receive *some* to *extensive* information about the client** (*n* = 40, 53%) **and the interview** (*n* = 47, 72%) before their assignment.

- Interpreters Usually Received
- Intepreters Want to Receive

Access to Resources and Supports



Interpreters reported **lacking key resources and supports**, while perceiving their access as helpful.

Many interpreters failed to provide perceived helpfulness (24-60%) of resources/supports because **they lack access to use them to know how they could help them**.

- Unavailable to Interpreters
- Interpreters Perceive as Helpful

"Interpreters need more professional training from [the] best professional trainers." ~ P41

Discussion

Training for Interpreters

- Interpreters report infrequent interpreting for youth (under 18), yet Canada is seeing an increased need for them.
- Importantly, interpreters expressed interest in receiving specialized training for interpreting with youth clients, which can hopefully address the need for youth interpreters.

Receiving Information Prior to Assignments

- Interpreters reported rarely receiving any information prior to assignments even though they want it.
- Having access to detailed contextual information, interpreters could be better equipped for assignments involving sensitive topics, complex discussions, jargon (e.g., legal terminology), etc.

Access to Resources and Support

- Interpreters reported having limited access to key supports and resources, which may influence their ability to do their job.
- Limited access to essential resources and support may place interpreters at a disadvantage in fulfilling their roles effectively.

Conclusions

Implications

- Interpreters play an essential role in ensuring fair and equitable access to public services across Canada.
- Despite this, they frequently report an overall lack of support, resources, and information.
- Yet, highly experienced interpreters express an interest in receiving additional training, information, and support, demonstrating a need for increased access.
- As a largely freelance workforce, many Canadian interpreters may lack the opportuninties to access these resources and supports.

Limitations

- Small sample size
- Highly experienced sample
- Lacked diversity of Canadian context

Future Directions

- Increase sample size & diversity
  - Indigenous communities
  - Medical interpreting
  - Sign Language Interpreters
- Virtual Interviews

References

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3. Morrison, C. (2025, October 15). New procurement rules could lead interpreters to avoid federal work, association says. *The Canadian PressNorth Shore News*. https://www.nsnews.com/national-news/new-procurement-rules-could-lead-interpreters-to-avoid-federal-work-association-says-11348483
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