



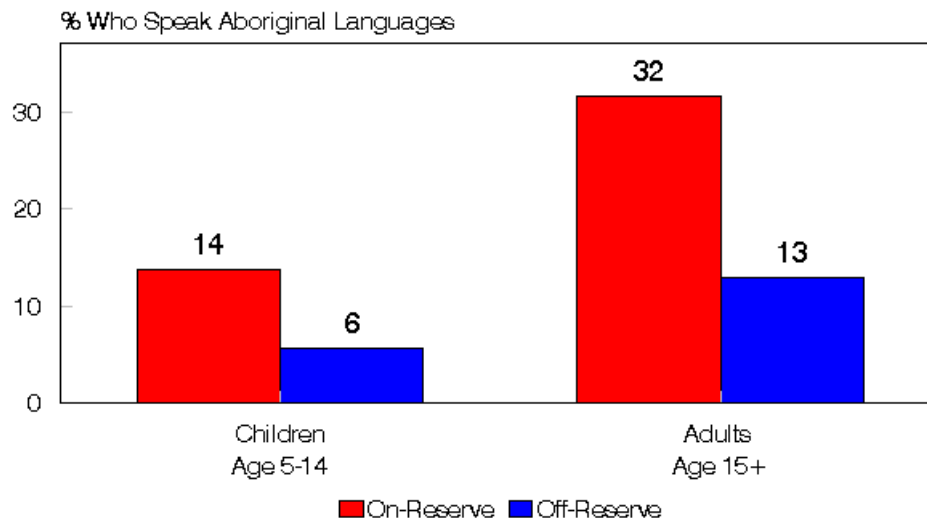
Census 91 Fast Facts

Issue 35: Knowledge of Aboriginal Languages

Produced by: Labour and Social Statistics Section

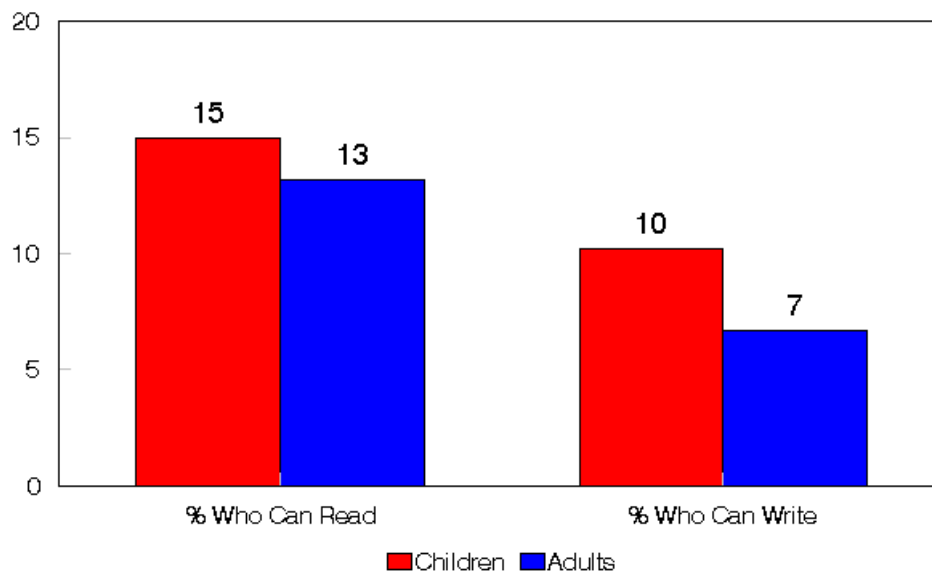
- In the Aboriginal Peoples Survey (a follow-up to the 1991 Census), those who identified themselves as aboriginal people were asked specific questions relating to their knowledge of aboriginal languages.
- Approximately 12,000 (or one in five) of the 61,000 adults in British Columbia who identify themselves as North American Indian speak an aboriginal language. Another 15,000 understand but do not speak an aboriginal language. This means that 44 per cent of the adult aboriginal population speaks and/or understands an aboriginal language.
- The Salishan and Nishga languages are the two most frequently spoken aboriginal languages, but the diversity of aboriginal languages spoken in the province is very broad.

The ability to speak an aboriginal language differs significantly between children and adults, on- and off-reserve



- As would be expected, knowledge of an aboriginal language is most prevalent among natives living on-reserve. Proportionately, the number of adults living on-reserve who speak an aboriginal language is more than double the number of those living off-reserve. In both groups, aboriginal language knowledge was generally acquired through parents, grandparents and elders rather than through the education system.

Children on-reserve are more likely to read and write an aboriginal language than their parents



- Less than one in ten native children speak an aboriginal language and among those who do, the majority have been taught by school teachers. While grandparents and/or elders have also contributed significantly to the children's acquisition of an aboriginal language, parents appear to have played a relatively minor role. This is particularly true on-reserve, where only one in three children who speak an aboriginal language learned to speak it from their parents.
- The school system is playing an increasingly important role in teaching native children to read and write aboriginal languages. Among children living on-reserve, 15 per cent are able to read an aboriginal language and 10 per cent are able to write one. It should be noted that these figures include children in the primary grades who are just beginning to learn to read and write. Thus it is probable that these numbers understate the true extent to which children are being taught native languages today. Even with this understatement, children on-reserve are more capable of reading and writing an aboriginal language than are the adults.
- The numbers available from Statistics Canada aggregate all adults together with no age breakout. Thus, it is difficult to document if the ability to speak aboriginal languages has been declining over the years. However, the responses to the survey question "Who taught you to speak an aboriginal language?" do indicate that the older population (grandparents and elders) passed on to their children the ability to understand, but not necessarily to speak, the language. Now the spoken language is being reintroduced to their grandchildren primarily through the school system.

Knowledge of Aboriginal Languages among North American Indians, British Columbia, 1991

North American Indians	Total	Adults Age 15+		Children Age 5-14		
		On-Reserve	Off-Reserve	Total	On-Reserve	Off-Reserve
Population	60,695	20,135	40,560	20,715	6,710	14,000
<i>Per cent of Population who:</i>						
Speak an aboriginal Language	19.2	31.6	13.0	8.3	13.8	5.7
Learned to speak an aboriginal language in school	9.2	6.8	12.1	64.8	75.7	52.2
Do not speak but understand an aboriginal language	24.5	28.8	22.4	13.3	23.2	8.6
Read an aboriginal language	8.0	13.2	5.4	8.3	15.0	5.0
Write an aboriginal language	3.9	6.7	2.5	6.0	10.2	4.1
Participate in traditional Activities	54.8	70.9	46.8	42.8	64.0	32.7

Source: Statistics Canada, Aboriginal Peoples Survey