



Strategic Research La recherche stratégique

Aboriginal Populations in Canadian Cities

WHY ARE THEY GROWING SO FAST?

Key findings:

- Canada's urban Aboriginal population is growing almost five times faster than its Non-Aboriginal population.
- This growth is not a result of a mass exodus from reserve communities.
- From 1996-2006 this growth was driven by changes in self-reporting cultural identity, particularly among the Métis.

Introduction

This research brief reviews the growth of the urban Aboriginal population as shown by the Canadian Census of Population from 1996 to 2006. It then considers the factors contributing to that growth. Statistics Canada defines as urban an area with a population of at least 1,000 and no fewer than 400 persons per square kilometre. Comparisons are then made among identity groups based on self-reported identity and Indian registration status or membership in a First Nation. Identity groups include Registered Indian, Non-status Indian, Inuit, Métis and Non-Aboriginal populations.

Rapid Growth

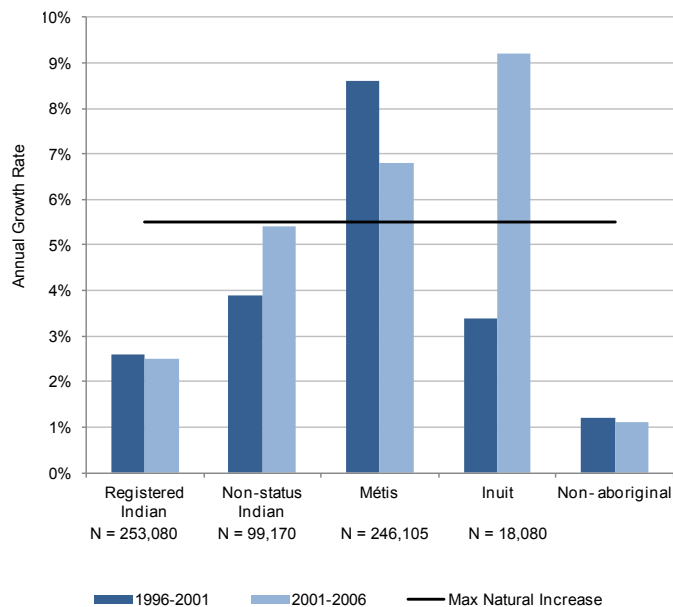
The urban Aboriginal population has grown rapidly in the past decade: from 392,335 people in 1996 to 623,470 in 2006. This is an average growth of almost 5% per year. By comparison, the urban non-Aboriginal population grew by about 1% per year during the same decade.

This growth varies greatly among Aboriginal groups (Figure 1). The number of Registered Indians grew from 197,055 in 1996 to 253,080 in 2006, which translates into an average growth rate of 2.5% per year. The Métis population exploded during this period with growth ranging from 6.8% to 8.6% per year and resulting in a doubling of its size, from 117,590 to 246,105 people. Representing a much smaller portion of the urban Aboriginal population, the Non-Status Indian population also grew rapidly, with annual growth rates ranging from 3.9% to 5.4%. The urban Inuit population also grew, although its size is much smaller. In 2006, the Inuit account for less than 5% of the urban Aboriginal population.

Contributing Factors

What factors have driven the rapid growth of the urban Aboriginal population? In answering this question, four possibilities are generally offered.

Figure 1: Annual Growth Rate of Urban Aboriginal and Non-aboriginal Populations, 1996-2001 and 2001-2006



(N) = Urban population size in 2006.

Source: Statistics Canada, 1996, 2001 and 2006 Censuses of Population, AANDC tabulations.

Natural Increase

The overall growth of the urban Aboriginal groups outpaced that of the Non-Aboriginal population between 1996 and 2006. At times it exceeded 5.5% per year, the theoretical maximum for a population subject only to the natural movements of births and deaths (Figure 1). Populations maintaining a growth of 5.5% per year double every thirteen years. After one hundred years, it is over 200 times larger than it was at the start. Today, the highest national rates of natural increase in the world are about 3.5% per year.

If only fertility and mortality were involved, urban Aboriginal populations would be growing at 1 to 2% per year. It is clear that factors beyond natural increase are also at play.

Migration

Migration from reserves is often cited as an explanation for urban Aboriginal population growth. For this to be the case, the growth between 1996 and 2006 would have come mainly from the Registered and Non-Status Indian populations. But as Figure 2 shows, this is not the case. While the registered Indian population accounts for 24% of the growth and the Non-Status Indian population 16%, more than half (56%) of the urban population growth came from the Métis, who do not reside on reserves.

The proportion of Métis peoples in the urban Aboriginal population grew from 30% in 1996 to 40% in 2006.

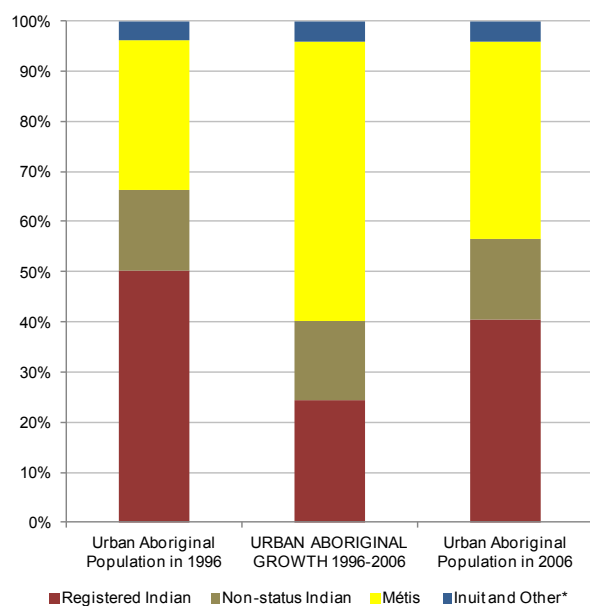
Additional evidence on net migration reveals that more people moved to Indian reserves than away from them (Table 1). Net migration is the difference between in- and out-migrants. Between 1996 and 2006, net migration to reserves was positive (+10,995; +10,065). For urban areas, it was slightly negative (-4,525; +3,720).

Clearly migration does not explain the growth of the urban Aboriginal population. And, contrary to popular belief, there has been no “mass exodus” from Indian reserves.

Data Quality

More informed users of census data on Aboriginal populations may raise the issue of data quality as a possible explanation. Every census, some people are missed, while others are counted by mistake or counted more than once. If the rate of coverage of the population varies between censuses, this could result in a distorted measure of population growth. However, Statistics Canada’s own analysis shows that coverage was relatively stable from 1996 to 2006. The urban Aboriginal demographic explosion cannot be a result of variations in data quality during this period.

Figure 2: Population Size and Growth Distribution by Aboriginal Group, 1996-2006



**Other* includes: (i) persons who declared more than one Aboriginal identity, and (ii) persons who did not declare an Aboriginal identity but reported being a member of an Indian Band/First Nation.

Source: Statistics Canada, 1996 and 2006 Censuses of Population, AANDC tabulations.

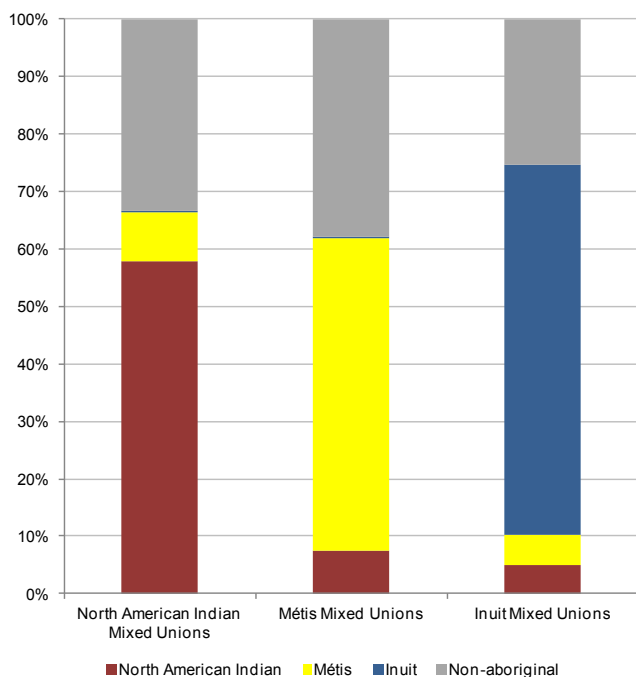
The observed growth of urban Aboriginal populations cannot be attributed entirely to a natural increase through births and deaths. It did not result from migration or issues with data quality. So what is the main cause of this extraordinary growth?

Ethnic Mobility

The analysis of data reveals that the spectacular growth of urban Aboriginal populations from 1996 to 2006 is due in part to “ethnic mobility.” Ethnic mobility is the phenomenon by which changes in ethnocultural affiliation happen among individuals and families. There are two kinds of ethnic mobility: intergenerational (or across generations) and intragenerational (within generations).

Intergenerational ethnic mobility may happen when parents report their child’s ethnocultural group for the first time, particularly if the two parents do not belong to the same group. It is a slow process, manifesting itself over successive generations, and has long contributed to the growth of Aboriginal groups in Canada. An analysis of Aboriginal families in 2001 revealed that more than half of children born to parents of differing cultural groups (mixed unions) were declared to belong to the group of their Aboriginal parent (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Identity of Children (0-4 years) of Mixed Unions in Canadian Cities, 2001



Source: Statistics Canada, 2001 Census of Population, AANDC tabulations.

Table 1: Net Migration of Aboriginal Population Aged 5+ Years, 1996-2001 and 2001-2006

PLACE OF RESIDENCE	NET MIGRATION	
	1996-2001	2001-2006
ON-RESERVE	+10,995	+10,065
URBAN OFF-RESERVE	-4,525	+3,720
RURAL OFF-RESERVE	-6,430	-13,805

Source: Statistics Canada, 2001 and 2006 Censuses of Population, AANDC tabulations.

Intragenerational ethnic mobility results when individuals change their self-reported ethnocultural affiliation over time. This type has been identified as the primary source of the recent growth of the First Nation and Métis populations. Estimates for the 1996 to 2006 period, produced in collaboration with Statistics Canada, show that:

- Nearly 146,000 Métis in 2006 (or one in five) did not self-identify as Métis in 1996;
- About 59,000 First Nations living off reserve in 2006 (one in sixteen) did not self-identify as such in 1996; and,
- About 90% of the changes in self-reporting ethnocultural affiliation occur in urban settings.

A similar phenomenon has been documented among indigenous populations in the United States. There is no definitive explanation for the increase in self-reporting Aboriginal identities in Canada. Reasons may include the great ethnic diversity of Canadian cities, increased awareness of one’s identity, improved public perceptions about Aboriginal peoples, and recent legal decisions.

Conclusions

The Aboriginal population is growing much faster than the non-Aboriginal population, especially in Canadian cities. From 1996 to 2006, ethnic mobility was the primary factor of that growth. This holds true for the Métis in particular. The large number of changes in self-reported ethnocultural affiliation affects both the size and characteristics of the urban Aboriginal population (e.g., education and income levels, housing, and family size). Fertility also contributed to the growth, but to a much smaller extent. Finally, the assumption that urban growth is the singular result of migration

Note on 2011 data

According to data from the 2011 National Household Survey (NHS), Aboriginal population growth in Canada remains very dynamic. However, additional analysis of the 2011 NHS data is required for a more precise assessment of the components of the demographic growth of Aboriginal populations from 2006 to 2011. Early indications suggest that changes in self-identification (ethnic mobility) remains a contributing factor.

About the researchers and the study

This research brief is based on articles and presentations by Eric Guimond, Director of the Strategic Research Directorate at Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, in collaboration with Norbert Robitaille (University of Montreal), Sacha Sénécal (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada), Eric Caron-Malenfant and Denis Lebel (Statistics Canada). The Métis and Non-Status Relations Directorate also contributed to the development of this research brief. The Office of the Federal Interlocutor works to raise awareness about the circumstances of Métis, non-status Indians and urban Aboriginal people, and to create opportunities for a greater number of Aboriginal people to participate in the Canadian economy and society.

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The Strategic Research Directorate is mandated to support the Federal Government's policy making regarding First Nations, Métis, Inuit and northern peoples in Canada. It does this through a program of survey development, policy research and knowledge transfer.

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