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 Métis and changes in self-identification.

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. This growth varies greatly among Aboriginal groups (Figure 1). By comparison, the urban non-Aboriginal population grew by about 1% per year during the same decade.

Figure 2 shows the relative size and growth rates of each Aboriginal group for the ten year period between 1996 and 2006. Marking 41% percent of the urban Aboriginal population in 2006, the number of Registered Indians grew from 197,055 in 1996 to 253,080 in 2006. This translates into an average growth rate of 2.5%.

The Métis population, which formed 40% of the urban Aboriginal population in 2006, exploded during this period. Its growth rates ranged from 6.8% to 8.6% per year, doubling its size from 117,590 to 246,105 people. Representing a much smaller portion of the urban Aboriginal population, the Non-Status Indian population (16%) also grew rapidly, with annual growth rates ranging from 3.9% to 5.4%. The urban Inuit population and those with other Aboriginal identities also grew, although their numbers were much smaller. In 2006, these groups accounted 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.

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 total 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 net 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; others are counted by mistake or counted more than once. If the rate of coverage varies between censuses, this...
could result in a distorted measure of 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.

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 data suggest that the spectacular growth of urban Aboriginal populations from 1996 to 2006 is due in part to “ethnic mobility.” This occurs when individuals and families change their self-declared ethnic identity, for example, in censuses. There are two kinds of ethnic mobility: intergenerational (or across generations) and intragenerational (within generations). The importance of ethnic mobility varies across Aboriginal groups.

Intergenerational ethnic mobility may happen when parents report their child’s ethno-cultural group for the first time. This occurs where 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 were declared to belong to the group of their Aboriginal parent (Figure 3).

Intrigenerational ethnic mobility results when individuals change their self-reported ethnic 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; and,
- about 59,000 First Nations living off reserve in 2006 (one in sixteen) did not self-identify as such in 1996.
- About 90% of the changes in self-reporting ethnic 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 among others.

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

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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>On-reserve</td>
<td>+10,995</td>
<td>+10,065</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban off-reserve</td>
<td>-4,525</td>
<td>+3,720</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rural off-reserve</td>
<td>-6,430</td>
<td>-13,805</td>
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Figure 3: Identity of Children (0-4 years) of Mixed Unions in Canadian Cities, 2001

**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 in that growth. This held true for the Métis in particular. Growth due to fertility was another factor. Migration was not a significant factor.

High rates of change in ethnic affiliation affect both the size and characteristics of the urban Aboriginal population (e.g., education and income levels, housing and family size). Moreover, the assumption that urban growth is a result of net migration from reserves to cities does not reflect reality.

**About the study**

This research brief is based on articles and presentations by Éric Guimond, Director of the Strategic Research Directorate at Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, in collaboration with Norbert Robitaille (University of Montreal), Sacha Senécal (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.