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Census in Brief

The Aboriginal languages of First Nations people, Métis and Inuit

Census of Population, 2016

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- . not available for any reference period
- .. not available for a specific reference period
- ... not applicable
- 0 true zero or a value rounded to zero
- 0^s value rounded to 0 (zero) where there is a meaningful distinction between true zero and the value that was rounded
- ^P preliminary
- ^r revised
- X suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the *Statistics Act*
- ^E use with caution
- F too unreliable to be published
- * significantly different from reference category ($p < 0.05$)

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Highlights

- In 2016, 260,550 Aboriginal people reported being able to speak an Aboriginal language well enough to conduct a conversation.
- The number of Aboriginal people who could speak an Aboriginal language has grown by 3.1% since 2006.
- The number of Aboriginal people able to speak an Aboriginal language exceeded the number who reported an Aboriginal mother tongue. This suggests that many people, especially young people, are learning Aboriginal languages as second languages.

Introduction

Language shapes the way that people think about and interact with the world. For many people, their ancestral language is integral to cultural expression and continuity. Aboriginal languages in Canada have been evolving in this land over generations and reflect rich and diverse histories, landscapes, cultures and knowledge. Many Aboriginal languages are unique to Canada, spoken nowhere else in the world. For these and countless other reasons, many Aboriginal people greatly value the preservation and revitalization of their languages. These languages are a significant part of the rich linguistic mosaic of Canada.

Past events have significantly harmed the vitality of Aboriginal languages in Canada. These include the residential school system, under which generations of Aboriginal children were not permitted to speak their Aboriginal mother tongues.¹ Today, as in the past, Aboriginal languages continue to be caught between the majority languages of English and French, which for many people are the dominant languages of work, education and everyday life. Several Aboriginal languages are now “endangered,” with few speakers, although a few others are considered “viable” in the long term.²

The 2016 Census is the most comprehensive data source on Aboriginal languages in Canada. This article provides a brief overview of the Aboriginal languages spoken by Inuit, First Nations people and Métis.

More than 70 Aboriginal languages are being spoken across Canada

More than 70 Aboriginal languages were reported in the 2016 Census.^{3,4} These languages can be divided into 12 language families: Algonquian languages, Inuit languages, Athabaskan languages, Siouan languages, Salish languages, Tsimshian languages, Wakashan languages, Iroquoian languages, Michif, Tlingit, Kutenai and Haida.

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1. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. 2015. *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Honouring_the_Truth_Reconciling_for_the_Future_July_23_2015.pdf). Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.
 2. Norris, M.J. 2007. “Aboriginal languages in Canada: Emerging trends and perspectives on second language acquisition.” *Canadian Social Trends*. No. 83. May. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 11-008-X.
 3. The number of Aboriginal languages has increased from previous census years because of several factors. Respondents who filled out the questionnaire online were prompted to provide more specific language information. For example, if a respondent filled in “Cree,” he or she may have then provided a more specific name upon prompting, such as “Woods Cree.” The population threshold for speakers of specific languages was lowered to 45, allowing for a greater number of languages to be reported.
 4. Some Indian reserves and settlements did not participate in the 2016 Census as enumeration was either not permitted or it was interrupted before completion. As a result, some estimates in this document may be underestimated, especially for First Nations people.

The Aboriginal languages of First Nations people, Métis and Inuit

Table 1

Aboriginal identity population who can speak an Aboriginal language, by language family, main languages within these families, and main provincial and territorial concentrations, Canada, 2016

| Aboriginal language families and main languages | Population ¹ | Main provincial and territorial concentrations |
|---|-------------------------|---|
| Algonquian languages | 175,825 | Manitoba (21.7%), Quebec (21.2%), Ontario (17.2%), Alberta (16.7%), Saskatchewan (16.0%) |
| Cree ² | 96,575 | Saskatchewan (27.8%), Alberta (24.0%), Manitoba (21.6%), Quebec (18.0%) |
| Ojibway | 28,130 | Ontario (56.6%), Manitoba (34.1%) |
| Oji-Cree | 15,585 | Manitoba (51.6%), Ontario (48.2%) |
| Montagnais (Innu) | 11,360 | Quebec (86.0%) |
| Mi'kmaq | 8,870 | Nova Scotia (61.9%), New Brunswick (24.6%) |
| Atikamekw | 6,600 | Quebec (99.9%) |
| Blackfoot | 5,565 | Alberta (98.7%) |
| Inuit languages | 42,065 | Nunavut (64.1%), Quebec (29.4%) |
| Inuktitut | 39,770 | Nunavut (65.0%), Quebec (30.8%) |
| Athabaskan languages | 23,455 | Saskatchewan (38.7%), Northwest Territories (22.9%), British Columbia (18.4%) |
| Dene | 13,005 | Saskatchewan (69.7%), Alberta (15.3%) |
| Salish languages | 5,620 | British Columbia (98.8%) |
| Shuswap (Secwepemctsin) | 1,290 | British Columbia (98.4%) |
| Siouan languages | 5,400 | Alberta (74.9%), Manitoba (14.2%) |
| Stoney | 3,665 | Alberta (99.3%) |
| Iroquoian languages | 2,715 | Ontario (68.9%), Quebec (26.9%) |
| Mohawk | 2,350 | Ontario (66.6%), Quebec (28.9%) |
| Tsimshian languages | 2,695 | British Columbia (98.1%) |
| Gitksan (Gitksan) | 1,285 | British Columbia (98.1%) |
| Wakashan languages | 1,445 | British Columbia (98.6%) |
| Kwakiutl (Kwak'wala) | 585 | British Columbia (98.3%) |
| Michif | 1,170 | Saskatchewan (41.9%), Manitoba (17.5%) |
| Haida | 445 | British Columbia (98.9%) |
| Tlingit | 255 | Yukon (76.5%), British Columbia (21.6%) |
| Kutenai | 170 | British Columbia (100.0%) |
| Total Aboriginal language speakers | 260,550 | Quebec (19.3%), Manitoba (15.5%), Saskatchewan (14.5%), Alberta (13.8%), Ontario (12.7%) |

1. Counts for languages within a language family do not add up to the total for the family because only the main languages are shown. Main languages are the 10 languages with the most speakers. If a language family did not have a language in the top 10, then the most spoken language in the family is displayed.

2. Cree languages include the following categories: Cree not otherwise specified (which refers to responses of "Cree"), Plains Cree, Woods Cree, Swampy Cree, Northern East Cree, Moose Cree and Southern East Cree. To obtain counts for these seven specific language categories, please see Catalogue no. 98-400-X2016159.

Note: 'Aboriginal identity' (<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/ref/dict/pop001-eng.cfm>) refers to whether the person identified with the Aboriginal peoples of Canada. This includes those who are First Nations (North American Indian), Métis or Inuk (Inuit) and/or those who are Registered or Treaty Indians (that is, registered under the *Indian Act of Canada*), and/or those who have membership in a First Nation or Indian band.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016.

The Aboriginal languages of First Nations people, Métis and Inuit

In 2016, the Aboriginal language family with the most speakers was Algonquian, at 175,825. The Algonquian languages most often reported in 2016 were Cree languages (96,575),⁵ Ojibway (28,130) and Oji-Cree (15,585).

Speakers of Algonquian languages span a great expanse of Canada. For example, Cree speakers were fairly evenly distributed across Alberta (24.0%), Saskatchewan (27.8%), Manitoba (21.6%) and Quebec (18.0%). Mi'kmaq speakers were concentrated in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, while Blackfoot speakers were almost all in Alberta.

Inuit languages were the Aboriginal language family with the second-largest number of speakers (42,065). Inuktitut was by far the most frequently reported language in this family, with 39,770 speakers, mainly concentrated in Nunavut and Quebec.

Within the Athabaskan language family, Dene was the most commonly reported language, with 13,005 speakers, mostly in Saskatchewan and Alberta.

Taken together, speakers of languages in the Algonquian, Inuit and Athabaskan language families accounted for 92.6% of Aboriginal language speakers in Canada.

Five of the remaining Aboriginal language families (Salish languages, Tsimshian languages, Wakashan languages, Haida and Kutenai) were primarily found in British Columbia. British Columbia is home to a large number of Aboriginal languages; however, many had relatively few speakers (all fewer than 1,500).

Speakers of Siouan languages were concentrated primarily in Alberta and Manitoba. Stoney, with 3,665 speakers, was found almost entirely in Alberta (99.3%).

Iroquoian languages were spoken in Ontario and Quebec. The most commonly reported language in this family was Mohawk, spoken by 2,350 people.

Michif is a language that developed among Métis and that combines French and Cree. In 2016, 1,170 people reported speaking Michif well enough to conduct a conversation. They were concentrated mainly in Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

Tlingit had relatively few speakers (255), mostly in Yukon.

The number of Aboriginal people who can speak an Aboriginal language is higher than the number who have it as a mother tongue

In 2016, 15.6% of the Aboriginal population reported being able to conduct a conversation in an Aboriginal language. This is compared with 21.4% in 2006. While the percentage of the Aboriginal population able to conduct a conversation in an Aboriginal language declined between 2006 and 2016, the number of people in the Aboriginal population who could speak an Aboriginal language increased by 3.1%.

In addition to the ability to speak an Aboriginal language, the census collected information on mother tongue.⁶ Mother tongue is defined as the first language learned at home in childhood and still understood. In 2016, 12.5% of the Aboriginal population reported an Aboriginal mother tongue (either as a single response or in combination with another language, such as English or French).

5. While some respondents reported "Cree," several others reported more specific languages, including Plains Cree, Woods Cree, Swampy Cree, Northern East Cree, Moose Cree and Southern East Cree.

6. The 2016 Census also collected information on Aboriginal languages spoken at home. For more information, see the census release of August 2, 2017, on [language](http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/rt-td/lang-eng.cfm) (<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/rt-td/lang-eng.cfm>).

The Aboriginal languages of First Nations people, Métis and Inuit

In 2016, as in previous censuses, the number of Aboriginal people able to speak an Aboriginal language (260,550) exceeded the number who reported having an Aboriginal mother tongue (208,720). This is evidence that people are learning Aboriginal languages as second languages. Learning an Aboriginal language at home in childhood as a primary language is a crucial element of the long-term viability of Aboriginal languages.⁷ However, second-language learning can be an important part of language revitalization, and efforts to preserve and revitalize Aboriginal languages through second-language learning are underway across the country. These efforts include incorporating Aboriginal language instruction in classrooms, creating standard orthographies and developing language immersion programs.

Nearly two in three Inuit can conduct a conversation in an Inuit language

In 2016, 41,650 Inuit reported speaking an Inuit language well enough to conduct a conversation, representing 64.0% of Inuit. The Inuit language spoken by the largest number of Inuit was Inuktitut, with 39,475 Inuit speakers. This was followed by Inuinnaqtun (1,310), Inuvialuktun (595) and other Inuit languages (350).

Most Inuit (72.8%) were living in Inuit Nunangat. Inuit Nunangat, meaning “the Inuit homeland,” is made up of four regions: the Inuvialuit region of the Northwest Territories, the territory of Nunavut, Nunavik in northern Quebec, and Nunatsiavut in Newfoundland and Labrador. Overall, 83.9% of Inuit in Inuit Nunangat reported being able to speak an Inuit language.

The percentages of Inuit able to converse in an Inuit language differed between the four regions. The vast majority of Inuit living in Nunavik (99.2%) were able to conduct a conversation in Inuktitut. In Nunavut, 89.1% of Inuit could conduct a conversation in an Inuit language. By contrast, 21.4% of Inuit in Nunatsiavut could speak an Inuit language. In the Inuvialuit region, 22.0% of Inuit could speak an Inuit language, mainly Inuvialuktun and Inuinnaqtun.

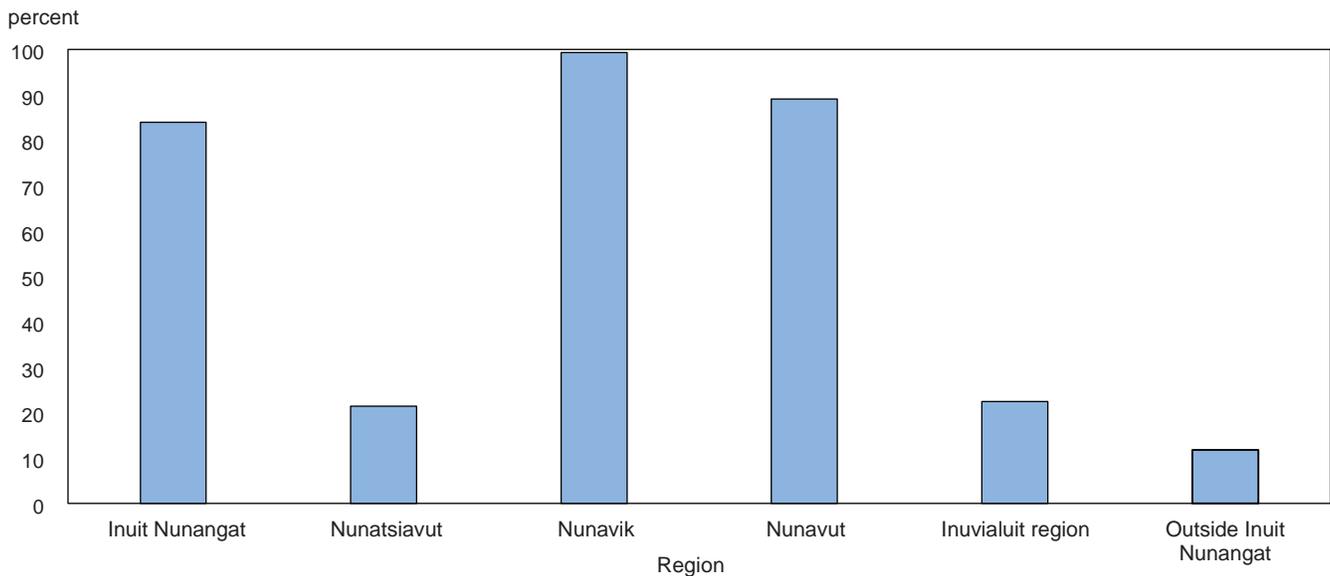
Outside Inuit Nunangat, 10.9% of Inuit reported speaking an Inuit language well enough to conduct a conversation.

7. Norris, M.J. 2007. “Aboriginal languages in Canada: Emerging trends and perspectives on second language acquisition.” *Canadian Social Trends*. No. 83. May. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 11-008-X.

The Aboriginal languages of First Nations people, Métis and Inuit

Chart 1

Percentage of Inuit population who can speak an Inuit language, by region, Canada, 2016



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016.

Younger Inuit are learning Inuit languages as second languages

Among Inuit, a higher percentage of seniors reported having an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue, compared with younger generations. In 2016, 60.6% of Inuit seniors aged 65 years and older reported having an Aboriginal mother tongue, compared with 55.8% of Inuit children aged 0 to 14.

In all age groups, the percentage of Inuit who could speak an Aboriginal language was higher than the percentage with an Aboriginal mother tongue. While 55.8% of Inuit children aged 0 to 14 had an Aboriginal mother tongue, 65.2% could converse in an Aboriginal language. This indicates that many Inuit, particularly younger Inuit, are learning Aboriginal languages as second languages. Indeed, the percentage of Inuit children aged 0 to 14 who could speak an Aboriginal language (65.2%) exceeded the percentage of Inuit seniors who could speak an Aboriginal language (61.3%).

The Aboriginal languages of First Nations people, Métis and Inuit

Table 2

Inuit identity population, by age and selected language characteristics, Canada, 2016

| Age group | Total Inuit identity population | Can conduct a conversation in an Aboriginal language | | Has an Aboriginal mother tongue | |
|--------------------|---------------------------------|--|---------|---------------------------------|---------|
| | number | number | percent | number | percent |
| Total | 65,030 | 41,830 | 64.3 | 37,260 | 57.3 |
| 0 to 14 years | 21,495 | 14,010 | 65.2 | 11,990 | 55.8 |
| 15 to 24 years | 11,990 | 7,725 | 64.4 | 6,830 | 57.0 |
| 25 to 64 years | 28,480 | 18,220 | 64.0 | 16,605 | 58.3 |
| 65 years and older | 3,060 | 1,875 | 61.3 | 1,855 | 60.6 |

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016.

About one in five First Nations people can converse in an Aboriginal language

In 2016, 207,755 First Nations people reported being able to conduct a conversation in an Aboriginal language, representing 21.3% of the First Nations population. A higher percentage of the First Nations population with Registered Indian status could converse in an Aboriginal language (27.3%), compared with the First Nations population without Registered Indian status (1.9%).

In 2016, 44.2% of the First Nations population with Registered Indian status were living on reserve. However, among the First Nations population with Registered Indian status who could speak an Aboriginal language, 72.7% were living on reserve. The overwhelming majority of on-reserve residents are First Nations people, and it may be easier to learn an Aboriginal language and maintain knowledge of it in an area with a high concentration of other speakers. In 2016, a higher percentage of First Nations people with Registered Indian status living on reserve were able to speak an Aboriginal language (44.9%), compared with those living off reserve (13.4%).

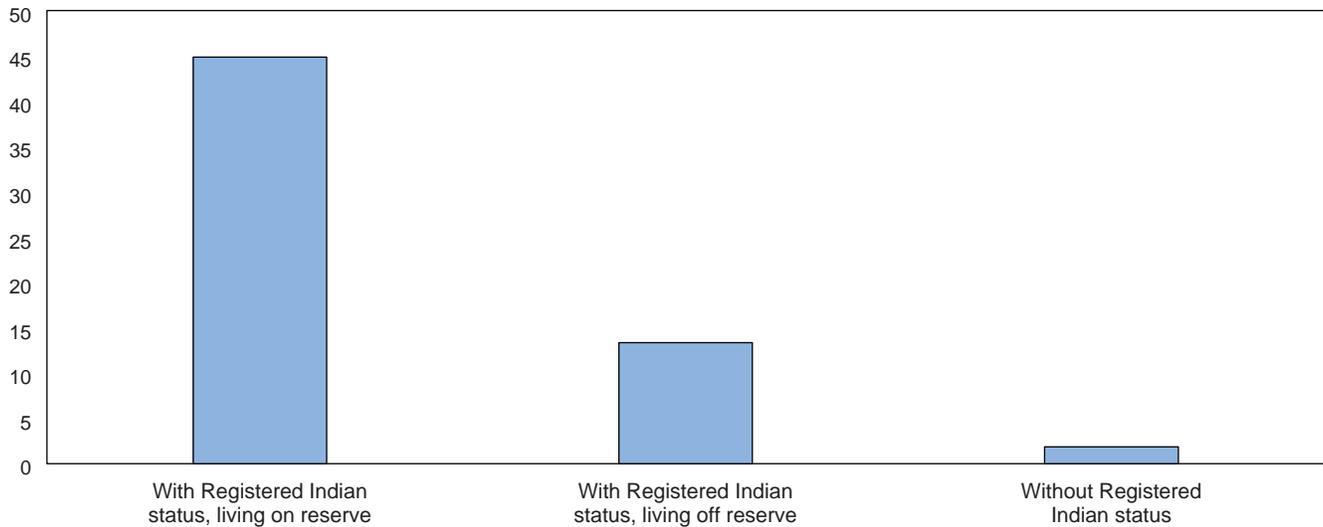
The Aboriginal languages spoken by the largest number of First Nations people were Cree languages, Ojibway, Oji-Cree, Dene and Montagnais (Innu).

The Aboriginal languages of First Nations people, Métis and Inuit

Chart 2

Percentage of First Nations population who can speak an Aboriginal language, by selected characteristics, Canada, 2016

percent



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016.

A higher percentage of First Nations seniors can converse in an Aboriginal language

Older First Nations people were more likely to be able to speak an Aboriginal language than their younger counterparts. Seniors aged 65 and older were those most likely to speak an Aboriginal language. In each subsequent younger age group, the percentage of First Nations people who could speak an Aboriginal language declined. In 2016, 35.6% of First Nations seniors could speak an Aboriginal language, compared with 24.5% in the 25-to-64 age group, 16.5% in the 15-to-24 age group, and 15.8% in the 0-to-14 age group.

However, it is important to note that the First Nations population is young—in 2016, there were more than four times as many First Nations children (285,825) as seniors (62,070). As a result, there were twice as many First Nations children (45,135) as seniors (22,125) who could speak an Aboriginal language.

The Aboriginal languages of First Nations people, Métis and Inuit

Table 3
First Nations identity population, by age and selected language characteristics, Canada, 2016

| Age group | Total First Nations identity population | Can conduct a conversation in an Aboriginal language | | Has an Aboriginal mother tongue | |
|--------------------|---|--|---------|---------------------------------|---------|
| | number | number | percent | number | percent |
| Total | 977,230 | 207,755 | 21.3 | 164,060 | 16.8 |
| 0 to 14 years | 285,825 | 45,135 | 15.8 | 30,540 | 10.7 |
| 15 to 24 years | 170,700 | 28,155 | 16.5 | 20,880 | 12.2 |
| 25 to 64 years | 458,635 | 112,340 | 24.5 | 91,990 | 20.1 |
| 65 years and older | 62,070 | 22,125 | 35.6 | 20,645 | 33.3 |

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016.

One in three First Nations seniors (33.3%) reported having an Aboriginal mother tongue in 2016. By comparison, about 1 in 10 First Nations children aged 0 to 14 (10.7%) had an Aboriginal mother tongue.

In all age groups, the percentage of First Nations people who could speak an Aboriginal language surpassed the percentage with an Aboriginal mother tongue. As with Inuit, this is evidence that many First Nations people are learning Aboriginal languages as second languages. This was the case particularly among young First Nations people.

Less than 2% of Métis speak an Aboriginal language

In 2016, 9,710 Métis, or 1.7% of the Métis population, reported being able to conduct a conversation in an Aboriginal language. More than half of Métis who reported speaking an Aboriginal language spoke Cree languages (5,960), followed by Dene (1,555), Michif (1,030) and Ojibway (685).

In 2016, 40.1% of Métis who reported speaking an Aboriginal language were living in Saskatchewan, 31.7% in Alberta and 9.6% in Manitoba.

Métis seniors are more likely to speak an Aboriginal language

In 2016, a higher percentage of Métis seniors reported an Aboriginal mother tongue and the ability to speak an Aboriginal language, compared with their younger counterparts. Unlike Inuit and First Nations, Métis seniors aged 65 and older also outnumbered Métis children aged 0 to 14 among Aboriginal language speakers.

Table 4
Métis identity population, by age and selected language characteristics, Canada, 2016

| Age group | Total Métis identity population | Can conduct a conversation in an Aboriginal language | | Has an Aboriginal mother tongue | |
|--------------------|---------------------------------|--|---------|---------------------------------|---------|
| | number | number | percent | number | percent |
| Total | 587,545 | 9,710 | 1.7 | 6,700 | 1.1 |
| 0 to 14 years | 130,990 | 1,255 | 1.0 | 680 | 0.5 |
| 15 to 24 years | 94,105 | 780 | 0.8 | 490 | 0.5 |
| 25 to 64 years | 311,340 | 5,640 | 1.8 | 3,780 | 1.2 |
| 65 years and older | 51,115 | 2,035 | 4.0 | 1,725 | 3.4 |

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016.

Data sources, methods and definitions

Data sources

The data in this analysis are from the 2016 Census of Population. Further information on the census can be found in the [Guide to the Census of Population, 2016](http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/ref/98-304/index-eng.cfm) (http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/ref/98-304/index-eng.cfm), Catalogue no. 98-304-X.

Additional information on census data quality and comparability for Aboriginal peoples can be found in the [Aboriginal Peoples Reference Guide, Census of Population, 2016](http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/ref/guides/009/98-500-x2016009-eng.cfm) (http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/ref/guides/009/98-500-x2016009-eng.cfm), Catalogue no. 98-500-X2016009.

Methods

Data in this document showing changes in percentages and proportions between the 2006 Census of Population and the 2016 Census of Population have been adjusted to account for incompletely enumerated Indian reserves in 2006 and 2016.

When data on Aboriginal peoples from the 2016 Census of Population are compared with previous cycles, several factors should be taken into account. Among these are differences in methodology, changes to the wording and format of questions, legislative changes, and differences in the list of incompletely enumerated Indian reserves.

Along with these factors, some people, for a variety of reasons, report their Aboriginal identity differently from one data collection period to another.

Random rounding and percentage distributions: To ensure the confidentiality of responses collected for the 2016 Census, a random rounding process is used to alter the values reported in individual cells. As a result, when these data are summed or grouped, the total value may not match the sum of the individual values, since the total and subtotals are independently rounded. Similarly, percentage distributions, which are calculated on rounded data, may not necessarily add up to 100%.

Because of random rounding, counts and percentages may vary slightly between different census products, such as the analytical documents, highlight tables and data tables.

Definitions

Please refer to the [Dictionary, Census of Population, 2016](http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/ref/dict/index-eng.cfm) (http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/ref/dict/index-eng.cfm), Catalogue no. 98-301-X for additional information on the census variables.

Additional information

Additional analysis on Aboriginal peoples can be found in *The Daily* (<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/171025/dq171025a-eng.htm>) of October 25, 2017, and in the Census in Brief articles entitled *Diverse family characteristics of Aboriginal children aged 0 to 4* (<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/98-200-x/2016020/98-200-x2016020-eng.cfm>), Catalogue no. 98-200-X2016020, and *The housing conditions of Aboriginal people in Canada* (<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/98-200-x/2016011/98-200-x2016021-eng.cfm>), Catalogue no. 98-200-X2016021.

Additional information on the Aboriginal population can be found in the *Highlight tables* (<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/hlt-fst/abo-aut/index-eng.cfm>), Catalogue no. 98-402-X2016009; the *Data tables* (<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/dt-td/Lp-eng.cfm?LANG=E&APATH=3&DETAILED=0&DIM=0&FL=A&FREE=0&GC=0&GID=0&GK=0&GRP=1&PID=0&PRID=10&PTYPE=109445&S=0&SHOWALL=0&SUB=0&Temporal=2017&THEME=122&VID=0&VNAMEE=&VNAMEF>), Catalogue nos. 98-400-X2016154 to 98-400-X2016180; the *Census Profile* (<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E>), Catalogue no. 98-316-X2016001; and the *Focus on Geography Series* (<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/fogs-spg/Index-eng.cfm>), Catalogue no. 98-404-X2016001.

An infographic entitled *The Aboriginal population in Canada* (<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-627-m/11-627-m2017027-eng.htm>) illustrates the demographic growth of the First Nations, Métis and Inuit populations and touches on Aboriginal languages in Canada.

For details on the concepts, definitions and variables used in the 2016 Census of Population, please consult the *Dictionary, Census of Population, 2016* (<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/ref/dict/index-eng.cfm>), Catalogue no. 98-301-X.

In addition to response rates and other data quality information, the *Guide to the Census of Population, 2016* (<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/ref/98-304/index-eng.cfm>), Catalogue no. 98-304-X, provides an overview of the various phases of the census including content determination, sampling design, collection, data processing, data quality assessment, confidentiality guidelines and dissemination.

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