



## Strategic Research La recherche stratégique

# Aboriginal Migration and Urbanization in Canada, 1961-2006

### Key findings:

- The proportion of Canada's urban Aboriginal populations increased between 1961 and 2006, growing from 13% to 53%.
- There was no significant departures of Registered Indians living on reserves to Canadian cities.
- Ethnic mobility has been a major factor of the recent urban Aboriginal population growth.

### Introduction

Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada commissioned Mary Jane Norris and Stewart Clatworthy to review long term trends of migration and urbanization among Aboriginal peoples. The report, "Urbanization and Migration Patterns of Aboriginal Populations in Canada: A Half Century in Review", is based on data from Canadian Censuses of Population.

In their study, Norris and Clatworthy focused on three questions:

- What are the trends of Aboriginal population growth in urban areas?
- What is the role played by migration as a factor leading to the urbanization of First Nations?

- What are the components of Aboriginal population growth between 1996 and 2001 in selected metropolitan areas?

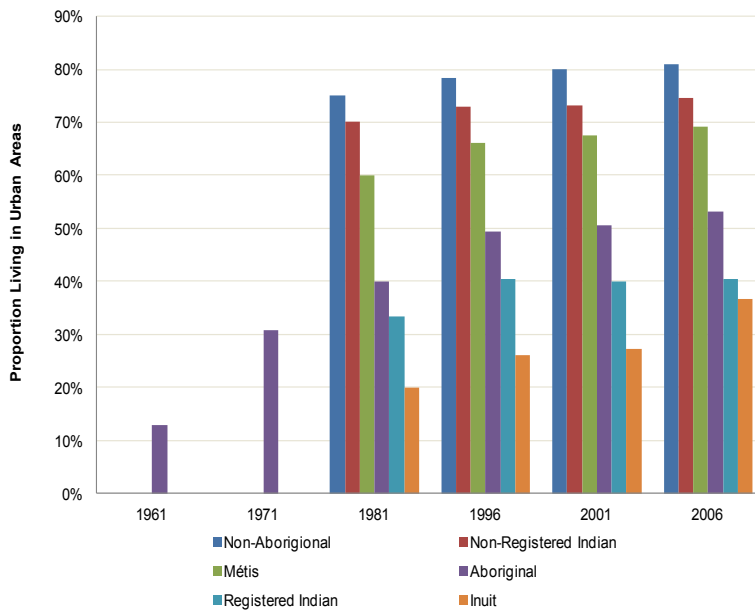
While investigating these questions, Norris and Clatworthy considered three components of population growth. The first is natural increase, which is the difference between births and deaths. The second is net migration, which is the difference between in-migrants and out-migrants. The third is ethnic mobility, a phenomenon expressed in two ways: intragenerational mobility, referring to the change in ethnic identity over the course of a person's life, and intergenerational mobility, referring individuals who, through their descendants, contribute to the demographic renewal of a group different from their own.

For the purpose of their analysis, Norris and Clatworthy divided Canada into four geographic areas:

- Metropolitan urban areas with at least 100,000 inhabitants and a population density of at least 400 persons per square kilometer.
- Non-metropolitan urban areas with at least 1,000 inhabitants and less than 100,000 inhabitants, as well as a population density of at least 400 persons per square kilometer.
- Rural areas located outside of urban regions.
- Indian reserves, tracts of Crown land set aside under the Indian Act and treaty agreements for the use and benefit of Indian bands.

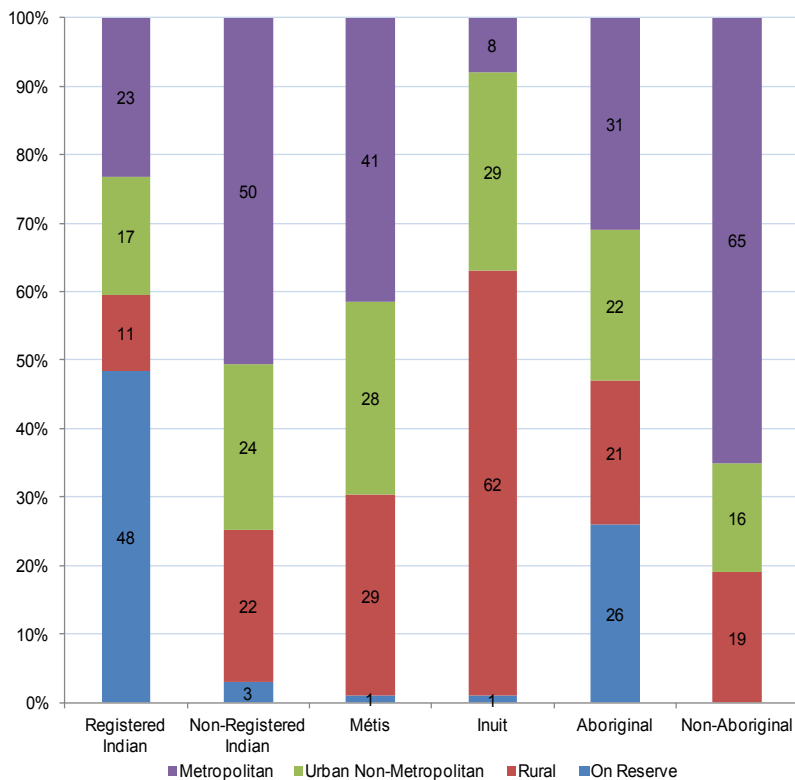
Norris and Clatworthy also distinguished Aboriginal people into four groups: Registered Indians (First Nations individuals

**Figure 1: Proportion of Aboriginal Population Residing in Urban Areas, 1961-2006 (excluding 1986 and 1991)**



Source: Norris and Clatworthy, 2011, p.33.

**Figure 2: Distribution of the Aboriginal Population by Area of Residence, 2006**



Source: Norris and Clatworthy, 2011, p.36.

who are registered as Indians under the Indian Act), Non-Status Indians, the Métis and the Inuit. The eleven cities discussed in this research brief were selected from the thirteen cities covered by the Urban Aboriginal Strategy (UAS), which together house more than 25% of Canada's Aboriginal population. However, there was no comparable data available for four of the UAS cities (Prince George, Lethbridge, Thompson, and Prince Albert). For this reason Norris and Clatworthy Saskatoon and Montreal because they had access to data on these cities.

## Main Findings

### Trends in Aboriginal population growth in urban areas

As a first step, Norris and Clatworthy explored the question of Aboriginal urbanization. Figure 1 illustrates the changes in the degree of urbanization for each of the four different Aboriginal groups between 1961 and 2006. Three observations can be made:

- The degree of urbanization of non-Aboriginal people has always exceeded that of Aboriginal people.
- The four Aboriginal groups have seen increases to their degree of urbanization.
- The degree of urbanization varies across Aboriginal groups. In 2006, non-Status Indians (74.5%) dominated, followed by the Métis (69.2%), registered Indians (40.4%) and the Inuit (36.8%).

Norris and Clatworthy were also interested in the spatial distribution of the four different groups of Aboriginal peoples (Figure 2). What was found is that, in 2006:

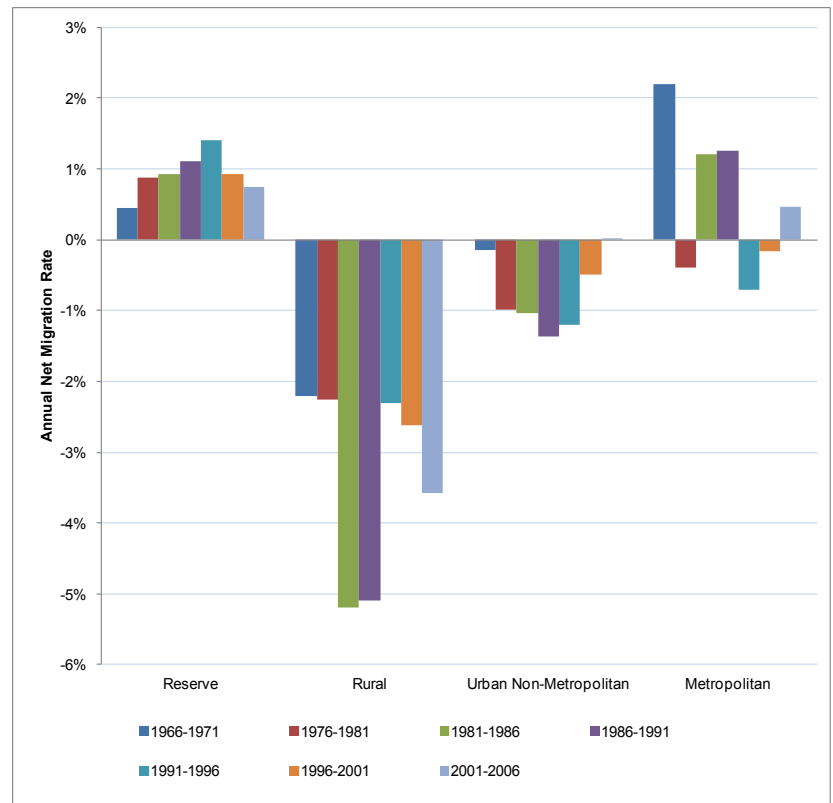
- Registered Indians were the only Aboriginal group with an important part of their members living on reserves (48%).
- The Inuit were the only Aboriginal group with a majority of its members living in rural areas (62%).
- Non-Status Indians and the Métis were the only Aboriginal groups with the largest part of their members living in metropolitan areas (50% and 41%, respectively).

## Role of migration and urbanization

Secondly, Norris and Clatworthy asked: What was the role of migration in the process leading to Aboriginal urbanization? In responding to this question, they examined the annual net migration rates of four geographic areas between 1996 and 2006 (Figure 3). The researchers made the three following observations:

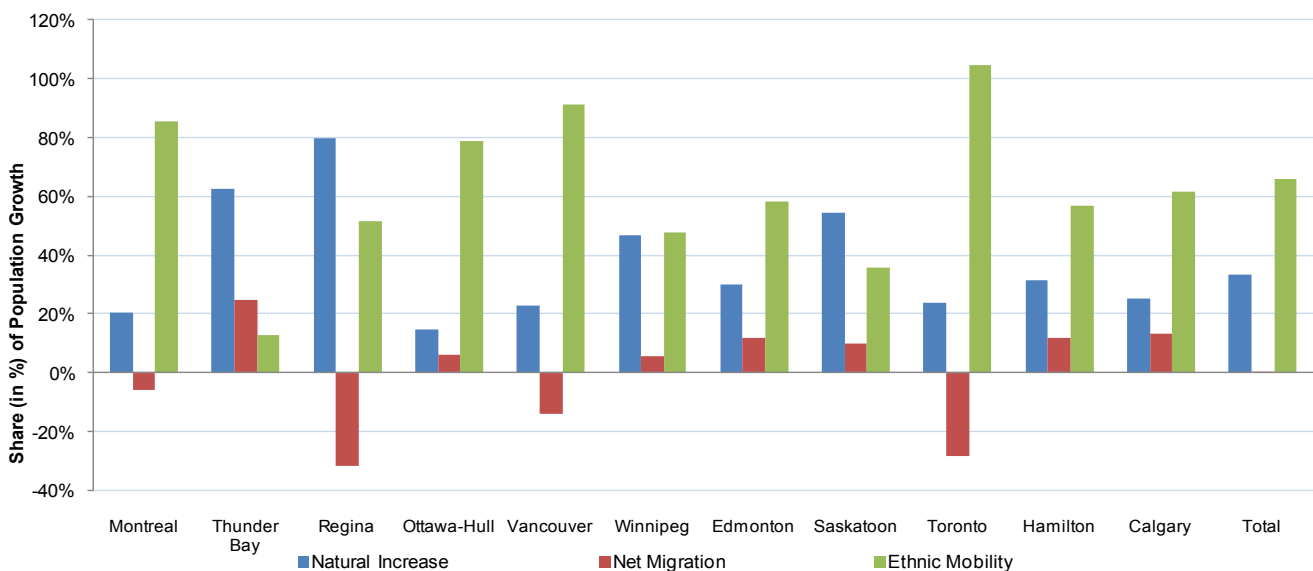
- Contrary to popular belief, which claims that reserves are emptying to the benefit of cities, the net migration rates of registered Indians on reserves were always positive, which means that the number of in-migrants exceeded the number of out-migrants.
- The net migration rates of registered Indians living in rural areas and in non-metropolitan urban areas were always negative, which means that the number of out-migrants exceeded the number of in-migrants
- The net migration rates of registered Indians in metropolitan areas varied over this period, with some periods being positive and others negative. However, migration rates to metropolitan areas were always low. Therefore, migration cannot be the sole explanation to the growth of First Nations in metropolitan areas.

**Figure 3: Annual Net Migration Rates of Registered Indians by Area of Residence, 1966-1971 to 2001-2006**



Source: Norris and Clatworthy, 2011, p.51.

**Figure 4: Percentage of Aboriginal Population Growth due to Natural Increase, and Ethnic Mobility, selected Metropolitan Areas, 1996-2001**



Source: Norris and Clatworthy, 2011, p.63.

## Components of Aboriginal population growth in metropolitan areas

Finally, Norris and Clatworthy assessed the importance of demographic factors contributing to population growth in metropolitan areas. To do so, they determined the percentage of contribution for each of the components of Aboriginal population growth in eleven selected metropolitan areas between 1996 and 2001 (Figure 4). They found that:

- With the exception of Thunder Bay, migration was the least important component of population growth in all metropolitan areas considered. In some metropolitan areas, migration even had a negative effect, resulting in a reduction of the local Aboriginal population between 1996 and 2001.
- Although not the main component of growth of the Aboriginal population, natural increase (births minus deaths) remained an important component of growth in metropolitan areas.
- Ethnic mobility was the main component of Aboriginal population growth in most of the metropolitan areas considered.
- In considering the eleven metropolitan areas together, two-thirds of the growth of the Aboriginal population was the result of ethnic mobility and around one-third was caused by natural increase. Net migration played a minimal role (less than 1%).

## Conclusion

Over the last five decades, the degree of urbanization among Aboriginal peoples has increased significantly, growing from 13% in 1961 to 53% in 2006. Contrary to popular belief, the increase of the Aboriginal population in urban areas is not the result of a mass exodus from reserves to cities. In fact, the number of registered Indians moving to reserves exceeded the number of those moving from reserves between 1966 and 2006. The growth of Aboriginal peoples observed between 1996 and 2001 in the selected metropolitan areas was mainly the result of ethnic mobility (66%) and less so a result of natural increase (just under 34%).

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## About the study

This research brief is based on a report co-authored by Mary Jane Norris and Stewart Clatworthy entitled “Urbanization and Migration Patterns of Aboriginal Populations in Canada: A Half Century in Review”, published in *Aboriginal Policy Studies*, Volume 1, Number 1, 2011, p. 13-77 (<http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/aps/article/view/8970>).

When this research brief was produced the 2011 data on mobility had not been released. While National Household Survey (NHS) data is now available, the comparability of the NHS to the 2006 data still needs to be verified. AANDC is considering pursuing similar analyses on Aboriginal migration and urbanization with the 2011 data when comparability is verified.

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For more information contact:  
[research-recherche@aadnc-aandc.gc.ca](mailto:research-recherche@aadnc-aandc.gc.ca)

**Director, Strategic Research:** Eric Guimond  
**Managing Editor, Research Brief Series:** Marc Fonda  
**Production Manager, Research Brief Series:** Daniel Jetté

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