Canadians with Multiple Racial Identities: Diversifying Canada's Multicultural Mosaic

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In the 2021 Census, more than 1.1 million Canadians, or 3.2% of the population, reported multiple racial identities, most often combining White with another group such as Black, Latin American, Arab, or Chinese. Nearly half of this population is second generation, and over half is under 25, with children especially likely to report mixed identities. Multiracial Canadians are concentrated in large urban centres, notably Vancouver and Toronto, with combinations varying by city. Tracking growth over time remains difficult because of limited comparable census data, though future increases appear likely. Greater attention to the lived experiences and sense of belonging of multiracial Canadians is warranted.

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Introduction

Canada is known for its ethnocultural and religious diversity, a characteristic of the country valued by many Canadians. The origins of the population have been measured by the Canadian census since 1871, illustrating how this diversity has evolved since it was first captured.

Canada's ethnocultural profile is becoming increasingly enriched and diversified with Canadians identifying with multiple racial groups[1]. The Census of Population has long recorded the growing number of those with multiple ethnic or cultural origins. The Census also captures those who have multiple racial identities, whether with responses of "White," and/or with other racial (population) groups. This dimension of ethnocultural diversity has implications for inclusion, sense of belonging and well-being of all Canadians.

Multi-racial groups is a salient facet of diversity in Canada and poses a challenge to the binary concepts of identity, yet little knowledge exists on their prevalence and trends and differences across groups[2]. This article briefly explores the

[1] It is well known that "race" as a concept is a social construct and that there is no consensus on the appropriate classification. Statistics Canada does not use the terms 'race' or 'racial identity' in its publications or questions, rather terms such as population group, visible minority or racialized groups. For this article, however, the terms 'multiple racial identities', or 'mixed racial groups' will be used. The data cited are based on the Census Population Group question.

[2] Hou, F., Schimmele, C., & Stick, M. (2023). Changing demographics of racialized people in Canada. Statistics Canada.

number and characteristics of those reporting multiple racial identities and highlights challenges in capturing this important diversity element.

Over a million Canadians report multiple racial identities

In the 2021 Census, there were 1.162 million people who reported more than one population group, representing 3.2% of the total Canadian population[3]. The Population Group question captures those who self-identify with one or more of the racial or population groups listed on the census questionnaire[4].

Most of those with multiple racial identities reported two racial groups (1.07 million persons), representing 92.1% of all those with multiple identities, or 2.9% of the total population in Canada. Less common were those with three or more multiple identities (91,730 persons), accounting for 7.9% of all those with multiple racial identities and 0.3% of the total population.

In comparison to the United States, there were about 33.8 million, or 10.2% of the total population who identified as belonging to two or more racial groups in 2000. Noteworthy is that the 2000 Census was the first time that the US Census Bureau allowed respondents to mark more than one race – a milestone for this country in recognizing mixed racial groups.

Most frequent multiples are with White

Most of those in Canada who self-identify as having multiple racial identities did so indicating their identity was White and one or more other population group. In fact, 871,050 individuals in 2021 identified their population group as White and one or more other group, representing 75.0% of all those with multiple racial identities. Among the population reporting two population groups, the largest groups were White and Black (155,240), White and Latin American (146,580), White and Arab (101,645), White and Chinese (89,750), and White and South Asian (74, 400). **(Table 1)**

Among those who were not White, the most frequently reported multiple identities were varied. The largest were Chinese and Southeast Asian (53,850), Chinese and Filipino (18,680), Filipino and Southeast Asian (14,470), and Black and Arab (12,130).[5]

[3] Includes persons in private households in occupied dwellings – 25% sample data, 2021 Census of Population

[4] The Population Group census question refers to whether a person reports being White, South Asian, Chinese, Black, Filipino, Arab, Latin American, Southeast Asian, West Asian, Korean, Japanese and/ or another population group. These mark-in categories are the ones used to also collect data on the visible minority population in Canada for employment equity purposes. Individuals can mark more than one category, and/or write-in a specific population (racial) group. The Population Group question includes a larger number of multiple-response categories that are not included in the visible minority variable and therefore is a more complete count of those reporting multiple racial identities. For more information on the population group and visible minority variables in the Census, please refer to Statistics Canada, Visible Minority and Population Group Reference Guide, Census of Population, 2021.

[5] In the analysis of multiple racial combinations, some combinations such as Arab and other population group, not included elsewhere (n.i.e.) (22,915 persons) were excluded because 'other population groups, n.i.e.' could include many different write-in responses to the Population Group question.

Table 1
Top 10 multiple racial combinations

	Number	Percentage
Total multiple population groups	1,162,055	100%
White and Black	155,240	13.4%
White and Latin American	146,580	12.6%
White and Arab	101,645	8.7%
White and Chinese	89,750	7.7%
White and South Asian	74,400	6.4%
White and Filipino	56,560	4.9%
Chinese and Southeast Asian	53,850	4.6%
White and Japanese	36,950	3.2%
White and Southeast Asian	30,855	2.7%
White and West Asian	25,160	2.2%
Two population groups	1,070,330	92.1%
Three or more population groups	91,730	7.9%

Note: Excludes combinations with population group, not included elsewhere.
Source: Statistics Canada, 2021 Census of Population.

Generational composition: nearly half were second generation

It is well known that diverse sources countries of immigrants to Canada is adding to the diversity of Canada's ethnocultural and racial populations. Generations in Canada, as measured by generational status, also is a factor influencing the number and characteristics identifying with multiple racial or population groups.

According to the 2021 Census, the largest proportion of the multiple racial population (46.8%) were second generation (born in Canada with at least one parent born outside Canada), followed by nearly a third (31.9%) who were first generation (born outside Canada), and less than a quarter (21.2%) who were third generation or more (born in Canada with all parents born in Canada). In comparison, over half of the total population (56.0%) were third generation or more, followed by 26.4% born outside Canada and 17.6% who were second generation. **(Chart 1)**

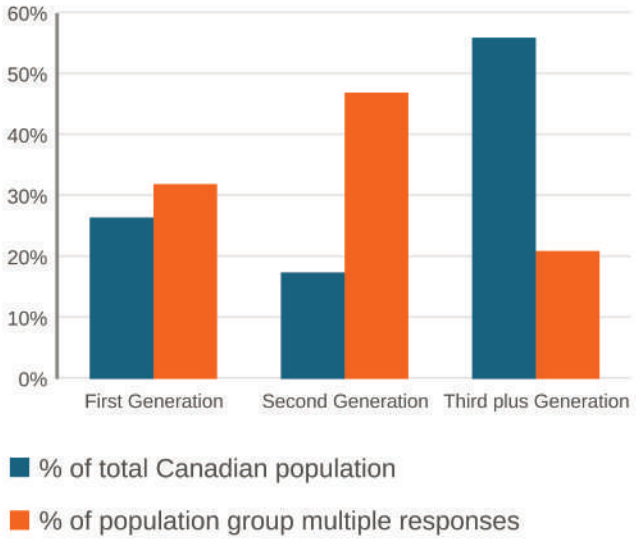
There were differences by generation status regarding the most frequent multiple racial combinations.

For those who were first generation (immigrants to Canada), most combinations were with White (60.4%), with the most common mixed identities overall being White and Latin American (66,500, or 17.9% of the first-generation mixed racial population), White and Arab (52,050,14.0%), Chinese and Southeast Asian (29,090,7.8%). [6]

Among the second generation, again most multiple combinations were with White (76.4%). What also emerges is that these identities are often with groups that have a long historical presence in Canada, such as

Chart 1

Proportion of those reporting multiple racial identities by Generation Status



Black. In 2021, White and Black (74,860 individuals, or 13.8% of the second-generation mixed racial population) was the most common mixed racial identity. White and Latin American (68,270, 12.5%), White and Chinese (44,000, 8.1%) were also among the most frequent, as was White and Arab (39,650, 7.3%), White and Filipino (39,575,7.3%) and White and South Asian (38,505,7.1). [7]These six mixed racial groups accounted for over half (56.0%) of second generation with multiple racial origins.

[6] In this section, 'multiple identities with White' includes two population groups (e.g. White and Black), and three or more population groups with White.

[7] It is noteworthy that these two groups (White and Latin American, and White and Arab) are excluded from the visible minority population, as defined to support the Employment Equity Act.

Looking to the third or more generation, most multiple identities are with White (93.7%). Again, the groups with a longer history in Canada are among the most reported multiple identities: White and Black (64,110, 26.0%), White and Chinese (37,290,15.1%), and White and South Asian (24,155,9.8%). Interestingly, White and Japanese (19,295,7.8%) was also a frequently cited multiple identity – reflecting the historical presence of Japanese in Canada.

There are many factors which explain the emergence of multiple racial identities across generations, including interracial and generational relationships, social contexts, and diverse immigrant sources over time.

Younger people more likely to have multiple racial identities

Age is another demographic dimension which illuminates the characteristics of the mixed racial population. In general, younger people were most likely to report multiple racial identities than was the case for older populations. Among those reporting multiples identities, over half (56.5%) were aged 0-24 years (respectively 39.0% were 0-14 years; 17.5% 15-24 years). This compares to 5.5% who were aged 55-64 and 5.1% aged 65 and over.

In total, 656,940 children, youth and young adults in Canada had multiple racial identities in 2021.

More specifically, among children (those under the age of 15), 7.6% or 453,290 of the total population had multiple racial identities, with White and Black, White and Latin American, and White and Chinese being the most common. Among young adults (15-24), 4.9% or 203,650 reported multiple racial identities, with the same combinations being the most frequent.

This changes with older age groups as just 2.3% of the total adult population (25-64 years) reported multiple identities. Interestingly, White and Latin American, White and Black and White and Arab were the most frequent ones – a bit different than was the case for younger age groups Finally, less than 1% of those aged 65 and older in Canada reported multiple identities, with White and Arab, White and Latin American and Chinese and South East Asian being the most frequent.

Regional differences

Not surprisingly, large urban centres in Canada had the highest proportion of multi-racial groups – reflecting the settlement of immigrants over time and the historical presence of some communities in specific urban areas of the country.

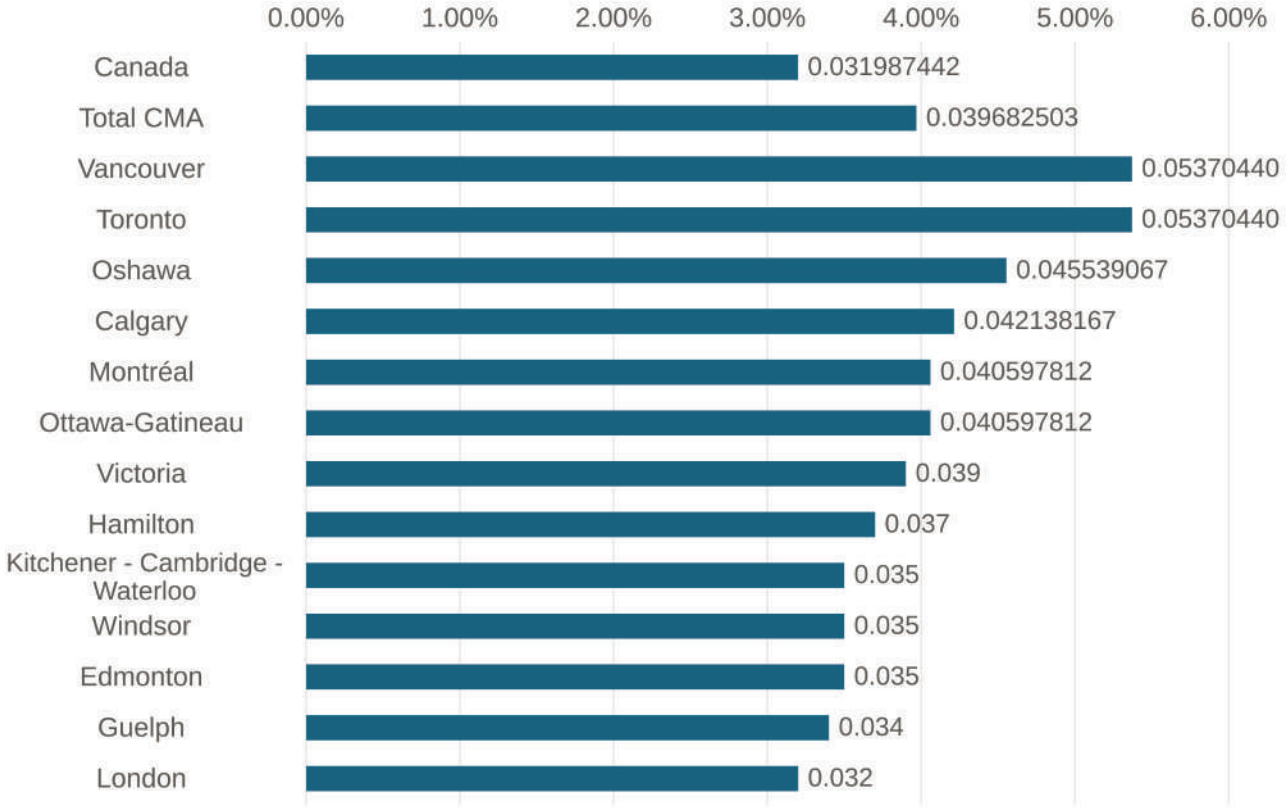
Overall, in 2021, 1,065 million individuals reporting multiple racial identities lived in one of the 41 Census Metropolitan areas (CMAs), representing 4.0% of the total CMA population, compared to 2.9% of the total Canadian population. In contrast, just 1.0% or 96,255 individuals with multiple racial identities lived in non-CMA areas.

Vancouver and Toronto had the highest proportions of those who identified with more than one population group – at 5.4% each of their respective populations.

Other CMAs with higher proportions were Oshawa (4.6%), Calgary (4.2%), Montréal (4.1%), Ottawa-Gatineau (4.1%), Victoria (3.9%) and Hamilton (3.7%). **(Chart 2)**

Chart 2

Proportion reporting multiple racial identities, selected Census Metropolitan Area (CMA)



Source: Statistics Canada, 2021 Census of Population.

Multiple racial identity combinations varied by urban area

Looking at the CMAs with the highest proportion of multiple population groups, there were variations as to the most frequent combinations. The most frequent tended to be with White, with Chinese and Southeast Asian sometimes being frequent for certain urban areas.

The top five most frequent combinations accounted for 46.4% of all multiple combinations in Vancouver. White and Chinese (14.8% of all multiple racial identities) was the most frequent, followed by White and Latin American (10.8%), Chinese and Southeast Asian (7.7%), White and Japanese (6.6%), and White and South Asian (6.5%). These reflect where immigrants to Vancouver have settled over time as well as the presence of historical communities such as Chinese and Japanese.

The most frequent combinations accounted for 41.0% of Toronto's multiple racial identity population, with White and Black (11.1%), White and Latin American (10.9%), White and Chinese (6.5%), White and South Asian (6.4%) and Chinese and Southeast Asian (6.1%) as the five most frequent.

For some urban areas, just a few combinations accounted for a large proportion of the multiple racial identity population. For instance, in Montréal, three combinations accounted for over half (54.0%) of the total multiple identity population, specifically White and Arab (25.4%), White and Latin American (16.6%), and White and Black (12.0%). In Oshawa, White and Black accounted for over a quarter (27.6%) of the multiple racial identity population in this CMA. **(Table 2)**

Another way to look at diversity among the multiple racial population is to consider the proportion reporting three or more population groups. While relatively small at the Canada level (7.9% of the total multiple identity population, or 91,730 individuals), Oshawa had one of the highest proportions (11.6% or 2,175 individuals), followed by Toronto (9.7%, 32,115), Hamilton (9.5%, 2,725) and Vancouver (8.4%, 11,885) among CMAs with higher proportion of mixed racial populations.

Is the population with multiple racial origins growing in Canada?

Using Census data – likely the most comprehensive source of data on this population – it is difficult to say. Capturing this dimension of Canada's diversity is not without its challenges. For example, mixed racial groups cannot be identified in a comparable way across Census cycles. Only recently as of the 2021 Census, have the data on multiple population groups be made available publicly and in an accessible way.

Traditionally, the visible minority data has been used to track the frequency of mixed racialized groups, but this count underestimates this population.[8] Some groups are excluded from the visible minority population (e.g. White and Arab, White and Latin American) and the visible minority variable does not show the range of multiple categories with White or with other groups. Finally, multiple identities with Indigenous groups have not been captured in the Census. This will, however, become available in the future with changes to the 2026 Census long-form questionnaire.

[8] Individuals who were classified in the 'multiple visible minorities' category represented 0.9% of the total Canadian population in 2021. In comparison, using the Population Group question, individuals reporting more than one population group represented 3.2% of the total population in 2021. The category "Multiple visible minorities" includes respondents who checked two or more mark-in circles associated with groups designated as visible minorities.

Table 2
Selected CMAs by 5 most frequent multiple racial identities

Vancouver CMA	Count	% of multiple identities
White and Chinese	21,050	14.8%
White and Latin American	15,300	10.8%
Chinese and Southeast Asian	10,875	7.7%
White and Japanese	9,360	6.6%
White and South Asian	9,225	6.5%
Sub-total		46.4%

Toronto CMA	Count	% of multiple identities
White and Black	36,605	11.1%
White and Latin American	35,800	10.9%
White and Chinese	21,425	6.5%
White and South Asian	21,085	6.4%
Chinese and Southeast Asian	20,260	6.1%
Sub-total		41.0%

Oshawa CMA	Count	% of multiple identities
White and Black	5,170	27.6%
White and Latin American	1,555	8.3%
White and South Asian	1,295	6.9%
White and Filipino	1,050	5.6%
White and Chinese	1,045	5.6%
Sub-total		54.0%

Calgary CMA	Count	% of multiple identities
White and Latin American	7,965	12.9%
White and Chinese	6,895	11.2%
White and Black	5,790	9.4%
Chinese and Southeast Asian	5,200	8.4%
White and Filipino	4,500	7.3%
Sub-total		49.2%

Montréal CMA	Count	% of multiple identities
White and Arab	43,920	25.4%
White and Latin American	28,660	16.6%
White and Black	20,695	12.0%
Chinese and Southeast Asian	5,200	8.4%
White and Filipino	4,500	7.3%
Sub-total		49.2%

Ottawa-Gatineau CMA	Count	% of multiple identities
White and Arab	9,605	16.2%
White and Black	8,780	14.8%
White and Latin American	7,290	12.3%
White and Chinese	4,765	8.0%
White and South Asian	4,450	7.5%
Sub-total		58.7%

Source: Statistics Canada, 2021 Census of Population.

Conclusion

Identity, in general, can be fluid, complex and contextual, and may evolve over time, shaped by social, economic and other contexts.

The reporting of multiple racial identities is influenced by various societal and other factors, such as how racial categories are socially constructed and influenced by historical and cultural contexts, and how ethnocultural and racial identities are captured in data such as the Census of Population.

This article has made a first step to explore what we know from Canadian census data about those with multiple racial identities using the Population Group question. There is a growing demand for more detailed data about racialized groups to better understand the diversity of these populations. It would be worthwhile to explore the lived experiences of those with multiple racial identities, their sense of inclusion and sense of belonging, and the challenges and inequities they face in Canada. Finally, it is very likely this population will grow in the future, considering immigration trends and the long-standing presence of racialized groups in Canada, and due to the fact that younger Canadians are more likely to report multiple racial identities.

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