ABORIGINAL POPULATIONS IN CANADIAN CITIES: WHY ARE THEY GROWING SO FAST?

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ABSTRACT / RÉSUMÉ

Urban Aboriginal populations have been growing very quickly over the past decade. For most observers, migration would be the main driver of this spectacular growth. But research has repeatedly shown that the idea of a "mass exodus" of Aboriginal populations from Indian reserves to Canadian cities is a myth. Since 1966, there have been more people moving to reserves than leaving. In fact, traditional components of demographic growth – fertility, mortality and migration – cannot account for all of the observed growth. With this analysis, we show how ethnic mobility, defined as changes in self-reporting of ethnicity, has been and is likely to continue to be an important component to the growth of Aboriginal populations in Canadian cities.

Les populations autochtones en milieu urbain ont augmenté très rapidement au cours de la dernière décennie. Pour la plupart des observateurs, la migration pourrait être la principale composante de cette croissance spectaculaire. Mais la recherche a démontré à plusieurs reprises que l'idée d'un « exode massif » des populations autochtones des réserves indiennes vers les villes du Canada est un mythe. Depuis 1966, un plus grand nombre de personnes ont emménagé dans des réserves que celles l'ayant quité. De fait, les composantes traditionnelles de la croissance démographique – la natalité, la mortalité et la migration – ne peuvent pas totalement expliquer la croissance observée. Cette analyse démontre comment la mobilité ethnique, définie comme des changements dans l'autodéclaration de l'ethnicité, a été et continue probablement à être une composante importante de la croissance des populations autochtones dans les villes du Canada.

Improper interpretation of demographic data can have severe detrimental effects on one's understanding of socioeconomic trends, as well as on the formulation of policies directed at those trends. Consider a hypothetical scenario where a surge in demand for social assistance in a community triggered by massive migration of unemployed people from nearby rural areas is mistakenly attributed to poor job market preparation and/or postsecondary uptake among recent cohorts of high school graduates. In this scenario, policymakers would be oblivious to the root cause of the problem – lack of job opportunities in rural areas – and policy responses "would be geared to an erroneous interpretation of circumstances that in fact do not exist." (Guimond 2008)

Urban Aboriginal Canadian populations have been growing very quickly over the past decade. For most observers, migration would be the main driver of this spectacular growth. But as with our hypothetical scenario, research has repeatedly shown that the idea of a "mass exodus" of Aboriginal populations from Indian reserves to Canadian cities is a myth, and that other factors are at play. As researchers and Aboriginal community leaders continue their efforts to expand the foundation of knowledge regarding factors affecting Aboriginal well-being, it is crucial that these efforts be based on a sound demographic footing. This paper explores the phenomenon of urban Aboriginal population growth with the objective of separating myth from reality with respect to the factors contributing to the rapidly growing number of Aboriginal people in Canadian cities.

From 1996 to 2006, the overall Aboriginal population living in large Canadian cities[1] increased from 221,295 to 366,165 persons, growing by more than 5% annually on average (**Table 1**). By comparison, the non-Aboriginal population grew by less than 2% annually over the course of this decade.

There is great variation in growth among Aboriginal identity groups.[2] The North American Indian population, which accounts for more than half of the whole, rose from 129,700 persons in 1996 to 188,160 persons in 2006. While modest in comparison to the other groups, this pace of growth was nonetheless twice that registered by the non-Aboriginal population. In contrast, the second largest urban Aboriginal group, the Métis, literally exploded, doubling in size from 79,785 in 1996 to 160,870 in 2006. Inuit and individuals of other Aboriginal identities also experienced rapid growth, but their numbers are small relatively speaking; these two groups account for less than 5% of the urban Aboriginal population in 2006.

Overall, the observed increases for the Métis population greatly exceeded a maximum of 5.5% per yea that is theoretically possible for a population subject only to the natural movement of births and deaths (see textbox); North American Indian population growth was slower but still close to that threshold. What follows is an examination of the various phenomena at work here, including an analysis of the contribution of each.

A THEORETICAL MAXIMUM FOR NATURAL INCREASE

Theoretically, the maximum rate of natural increase is 5.5% per year. It is obtained from the highest birth rate (60 per 1,000 persons) observable in exceptional conditions –a young population, marrying young and practising no form of contraception– from which is subtracted the lowest death rate (5 per 1,000) persons observed at the time of this analysis. Such a combination of high fertility and low mortality has probably never been observed. Today, the highest national rates of natural increase in the world are at about 3.5% per year. A population maintaining a growth rate of 5.5% per year doubles every 13 years. After a hundred years, that population would be more than 200 times larger than at the outset. A growth rate in excess of 5.5% cannot be explained by natural increase alone: phenomena other than births and deaths are contributing to the increase (Guimond, 1999).

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

NATURAL INCREASE

The natural increase of a population is the difference between the number of children born and the number of persons who die in a given period. If Aboriginal populations perpetuated themselves solely through births, then natural increase and the total increase would necessarily be equal. But as Chart 1 reveals, this is not the case. For all groups and

TABLE 1: Population Size and Growth Rate, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Populations Living in Canadian Cities[i], Canada, 1996-2006.

	SIZE			AVERAGE ANNUAL GROWTH RATE	
	1996	2001	2006	1996-2001	2001-2006
Aboriginal Populations	221 295	279 875	366 165	4.8%	5.5%
North American Indian	129 700	151 770	188 160	3.2%	4.4%
Métis	79 785	114 085	160 870	7.4%	7.1%
Inuit	2 150	3 090	4 215	7.5%	6.4%
Multiple/Other[ii]	9 660	10 930	12 920	2.5%	3.4%
Non-Aboriginal Population (in thousands)	16 308.9	17 679.4	19 565.4	1.6%	2.0%

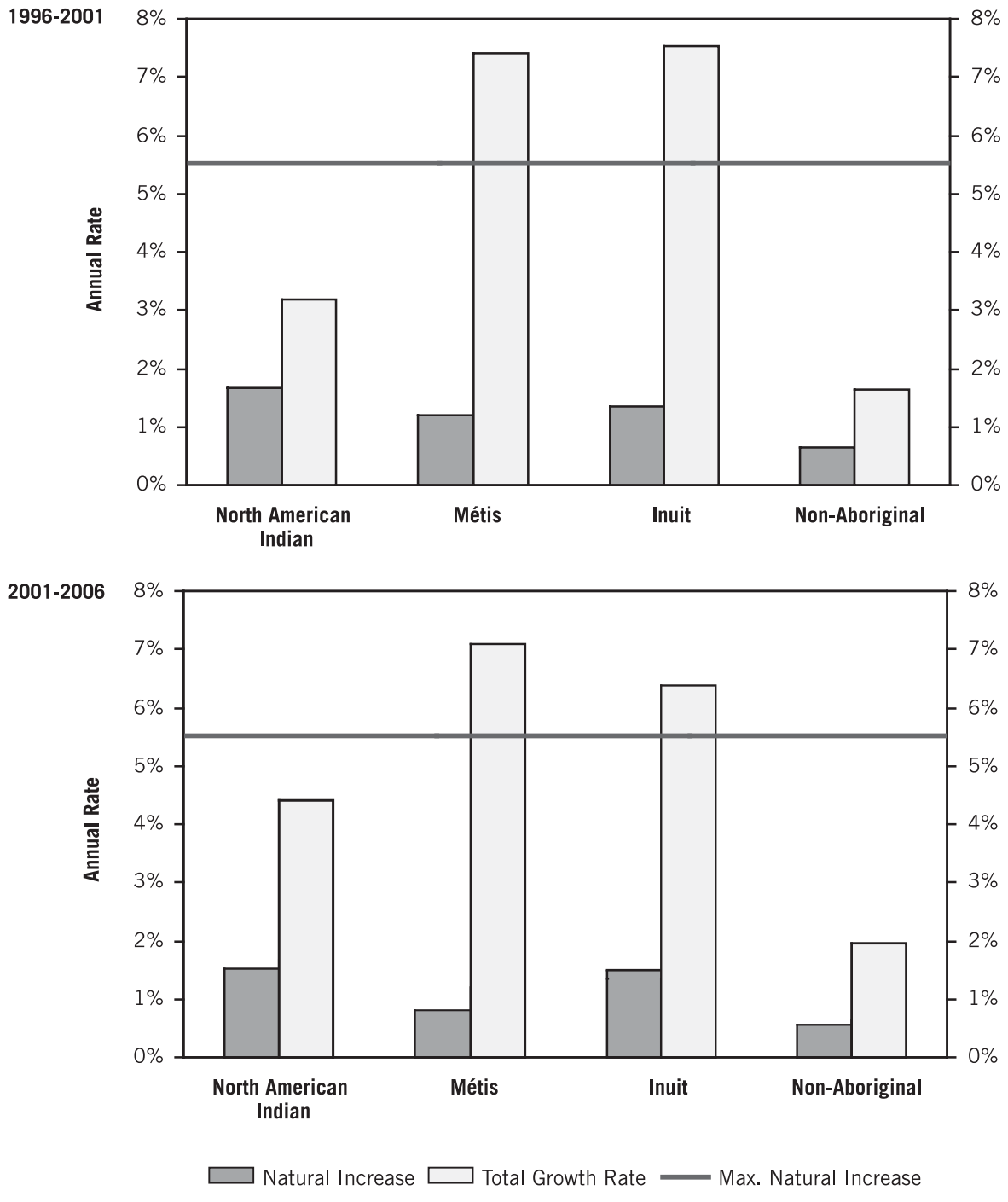
Notes:

[i] Includes all Census Metropolitan Areas (CMA), as defined by Statistics Canada, but excluding Indian reserves.

[ii] Includes: (i) persons who declared more than one Aboriginal identity; (ii) persons would did not declare an Aboriginal identity but reported being Registered or Treaty Indian; (iii) persons would did not declare an Aboriginal identity but reported being a Member of an Indian Band/First Nation.

Sources: Statistics Canada, 1996 to 2006 Censuses of Canada, custom tabulations.

CHART 1: Average Annual Natural Increase[i] and Total Growth Rate, Aboriginal and Non-aboriginal Populations in Canadian Cities[ii], Canada, 1996-2006



Notes:

[i] The birth rate was estimated using a child-population ratio approach and the death rate is assumed to be constant at 5 per 1,000.

[ii] Includes all Census Metropolitan Areas (CMA), as defined by Statistics Canada, but excluding Indian reserves.

Sources: Statistics Canada, 2001 and 2006 Censuses of Canada, custom tabulations.

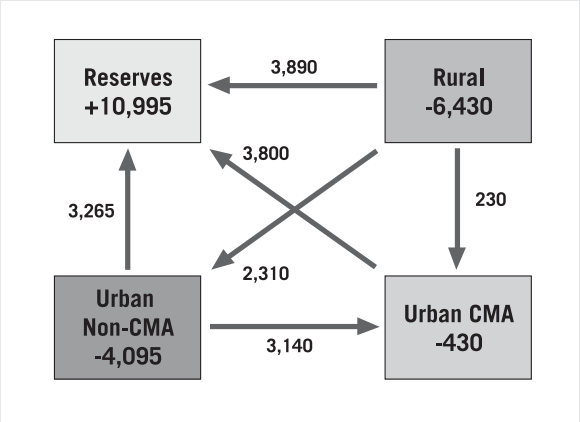
both intercensal periods, the observed growth rate of Aboriginal populations largely exceeds their natural increase. With respect to the Métis which have experienced a spectacular urban population growth in the last decade, the overall growth rate (7.4%; 7.1%) is six to seven times higher than what their natural movement of births and deaths has contributed to (1.2%; 1.0%).

Clearly, while the Aboriginal populations have higher fertility than the non-Aboriginal population, this alone cannot explain their exceptional growth in Canadian cities.

MIGRATION

Migration from Indian reserves is often alluded to in explanations of urban Aboriginal population growth. However, contrary to popular belief, there is no mass exodus from Indian reserves and settlements; in fact, analysis of census data on place of residence five years ago indicates that, overall, there has been a net inflow to Indian reserves since 1966 (Clatworth and Norris 2003; Siggner 1977).

CHART 2: Net Migration Flows of Aboriginal Identity Population Aged 5+ Years, Canada, 1996-2001



Source: Clatworthy and Norris (2003).

Analysis by Clatworthy and Norris (2003) of the 2001 census data show that the resulting impact of movement to and from Indian reserves between 1996 and 2001 is a positive net migration of +10,995 persons for these communities. For urban areas, the net migration is negative (-430 for urban CMAs; -4,095 for urban non-CMA areas), indicating that there are more Aboriginal people leaving the cities than moving to them for the 1996-2001 period. Preliminary analysis of 2006 census data indicates similar trends for the 2001-2006 period (Guimond and Robitalle 2008). Clearly, while Aboriginal populations are mobile, migration from Indian reserves and other rural communities does not explain the exceptional growth of the North American Indian and Métis populations in Canadian cities.

VARIATION IN THE QUALITY OF ENUMERATIONS

More informed users of census data on Aboriginal populations sometimes raise the issue of data quality as an explanation to the observed spectacular growth patterns. Every census, a certain number of individuals are missed (undercoverage), while others are counted by mistake or more than once (overcoverage). The difference between these two quantities is called net undercoverage. If the net undercoverage rate varies, the growth measure derived from the comparison of a population's size in two successive censuses is distorted: deterioration in quality of coverage results in an under-estimate of growth, while an improvement in quality results in an over-estimate of growth. If the quality of coverage is constant, we then have a "true" measure of relative growth. Although there is very little information about the undercoverage of Aboriginal populations in Canadian cities, available information points to a relative stability in the quality of enumeration between 1996 and 2006 (Statistics Canada 2005, 1989; Norris *et al*, 1995). It can therefore be said that the demographic explosion of Aboriginal populations in Canadian cities is not purely a statistical artefact.

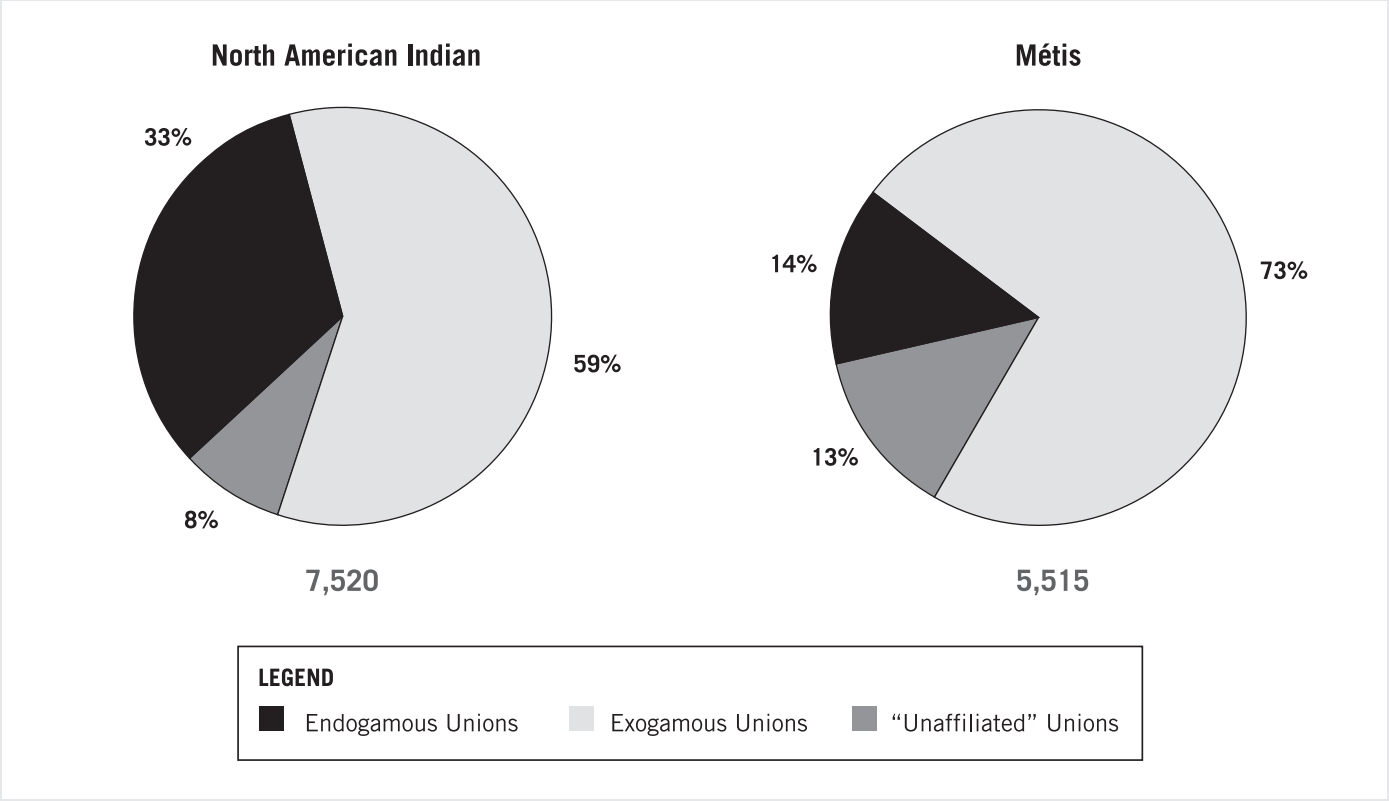
Clearly, the observed growth of Aboriginal populations is not limited to fertility, mortality, and migration, and is not simply the result of coverage errors. So what is the cause of such extraordinary growth?

ETHNIC MOBILITY

In light of the information available, the extraordinary growth of the Canada's Aboriginal populations in Canadian cities between 1996 and 2006 can be attributed, in variable proportions depending on the period and the Aboriginal identity group, to a phenomenon known as ethnic mobility. Different terms are used in the literature to designate this phenomenon: ethnic switching, passing, changing identities and changes in self-reporting of ethnic identity. There are two types of ethnic mobility: intergenerational and intragenerational (Robitaille and Choinière 1987).

Intergenerational ethnic mobility, which occurs within families, may happen when a child's ethnocultural affiliation is reported for the first time. Parents and children do not necessarily have the same affiliation, especially when the parents do not belong to the same ethnocultural group, i.e. when parents have intermarried. Intergenerational ethnic mobility has long been a component of the demographic growth of Aboriginal groups in Canada. The Métis, the second largest Aboriginal group, are a "product" of this type of ethnic mobility. Historical, geopolitical, commercial and cultural circumstances related to colonization of Western Canada led to the genesis of this

CHART 3: Distribution of Children Under the Age of Five Residing in Canadian Cities, According to the Type of Union of Parents, by Aboriginal Identity of the Child, Canada, 2001



Source: Statistics Canada, 2001 Census of Canada, custom tabulation.

Aboriginal cultural group, originally uniting descendents of North American Indian women and French men.

Contrary to popular belief, intermarriage and "inter-parenting" offer a great potential for demographic growth: a group of persons exhibiting a high rate of intermarriage has a higher potential for rapid population growth than a group with little or no intermarriage (Big Eagle and Guimond, in print; Robitaille and Guimond 2003). For Aboriginal groups in Canada, the realization of this potential rests with the members of these groups currently in mixed couples: how do they identify themselves and their children?

The analysis of 2001 census data on the cultural identity of children under the age of five reveals the importance of intermarriage and intergenerational ethnic mobility for Aboriginal groups in two respects. First, children of Aboriginal identity in Canadian cities are mainly from exogamous unions (i.e., only one parent belonging to the group) while less than a third are from endogamous unions (i.e., both parents belonging to the group). Secondly, about one Métis child in eight (13%) is from a union where no parent has Métis identity ("unaffiliated" union), and a majority (57%; not shown on graph) of these Métis children originate from an Indian/non-Aboriginal union. These observations provide ample evidence that intermarriage and intergenerational ethnic mobility are an integral component of the population growth of Aboriginal groups in Canada. These observations also reveal that the demographic dynamics which contributed to the ethnogenesis of the Métis in Canada during the 19th century are still at play at the start of the 21st century. The Métis population continues to benefit considerably from intergenerational ethnic mobility.

Intragenerational ethnic mobility results from a change in the ethnic affiliation of a person over time. This type of ethnic mobility has been identified as the primary source of the exceptional growth of Aboriginal populations. Estimates produced for the 1986-2001 period show that nearly 42 000 Indians living off-reserve in 2001 did not self-report as Indian in 1986, or one off-reserve Indian in eight (13%), and over 101 000 Métis in 2001 did not report as Métis in 1986, which amounts to four Métis in ten

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enumerated in 2001 (Guimond 2009). Moreover, analysis reveals that over 90% of *ethnic transfers* estimated nationally for the 1986-2001 period took place in urban areas. Preliminary analysis of the 2006 Census data indicate that intragenerational ethnic mobility is still the primary component of growth for the Métis population, especially in cities (Guimond and Robitaille 2008). The phenomenon of intragenerational ethnic mobility was also documented among Aboriginal populations in the United States (Passel, 1996) and Australia (Ross, 1996).

IMPLICATIONS FOR WELL-BEING ANALYSIS

That ethnic mobility is such an important component of the demographic growth of Aboriginal groups in urban settings requires us to consider the implications for analysis of socioeconomic trends. High rates of change in ethnic affiliation can affect not only the size of a population but also its composition, particularly if the socio-demographic characteristics (e.g., educational attainment, employment earnings, family size) of the pool of *ethnic drifters* are markedly different from those of the base population. As such, trends with respect to socio-demographic characteristics of urban Aboriginal people, and particularly of Métis, need to be interpreted with caution and with awareness of the potential impact of ethnic mobility on these trends (Guimond, 2009, 2003).

CONCLUSION

The Aboriginal population is growing substantially faster than the non-Aboriginal population, especially in Canadian cities. Ethnic mobility is the primary component of the urban Aboriginal population explosion between 1996 and 2006, in particular among the Métis population. The misinterpretation of trends towards urbanization of Aboriginal populations could result in: (a) over-emphasis on migration from Indian reserve to cities; (b) a policy-shift away from First Nations and Inuit communities.

Though there is no definitive explanation for ethnic mobility among Aboriginal populations in Canada, three types of factors may be considered. First, there are predisposing demographic factors. In Canada's large urban centres, people of various ethnocultural backgrounds meet, form couples and have children. Given their mixed ethnocultural origins, once they are adults, those children may "choose" their ethnic affiliation, and such a choice may vary depending on the circumstances. In a nutshell, mixed origins most likely facilitate intragenerational ethnic mobility.

Social factors could also foster intragenerational ethnic mobility toward Aboriginal populations. Different socio-political events – spontaneous like the Oka crisis in the summer of 1990 or organized like the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples from 1991 to 1996 – as well as their media coverage raised public awareness and contributed to restoring Aboriginal people's pride. Increased public attention and an improved overall perception Aboriginal people have of themselves could therefore have induced some people to report as Aboriginal.

Finally, political and legal decisions could also further foster ethnic mobility toward Aboriginal populations, especially if such decisions have spin-offs considered to be favourable. For example, the 1985 amendments to the *Indian Act* had a considerable demographic impact on the size and growth of the Registered Indian population: as of December 31, 2005, 115,551 people had acquired (or reacquired) Indian status under the 1985 amendments.

The potential impact of ethnic mobility on the socio-demographic composition of urban Aboriginal populations was noted, although it is worth mentioning that measuring this impact is exceedingly difficult. More analysis is needed to improve our understanding of both the phenomenon of ethnic mobility and its consequences.

NOTES

[1] Includes all Census Metropolitan Areas (CMA), as defined by Statistics Canada, but excluding Indian reserves.

[2] Since the 1996 census, Aboriginal identity refers to those persons who reported identifying with at least one Aboriginal group, i.e. North American Indian, Métis or Inuit (Eskimo), and/or those who reported being a Treaty Indian or a Registered Indian as defined by the Indian Act of Canada and/or who were members of an Indian Band or First Nation. See Statistics Canada (2008).

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