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# **Change in Reporting an Aboriginal Identity: Age Matters**

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## **Abstract**

The number of individuals reporting an Aboriginal Identity in the Census of Population has increased in each census by more than the number of births (minus deaths) of the Aboriginal Identity population. The number reporting an Aboriginal Identity has shown a consistent pattern of increase in each inter-censal period in each age group – with one exception. As individuals move from the age group of 15-19 years of age to 20-24 years of age, the pattern of increase does not appear for individuals with a First Nations Aboriginal Identity in Canada's four western provinces and in the northern territories. Age matters in the reporting of an Aboriginal Identity.

Keywords: Aboriginal identity, ethnic mobility

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## **1.0 Introduction**

Policy attention to Indigenous issues in Canada has increased since the publication of the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015). This attention will necessarily increase into the future as the Indigenous population is growing faster than Canada's non-Indigenous population, due both to higher fertility rates and due to 'response mobility' (discussed below). Given the relative intensity of Indigenous individuals in rural Canada, this policy attention will be especially important for discussions of rural development.

In 2016, 5.1% of Canadians claimed an Aboriginal Identity<sup>1,2</sup>. In non-metro Canada, outside metro areas of 100,000 or more, 10.2% reported an Aboriginal Identity. Among non-metro individuals under 25 years of age in non-metro Manitoba and non-metro Saskatchewan, one-third reported an Aboriginal Identity. Over the next 25 years, one-third of individuals entering the non-metro workforce in these provinces will have an Aboriginal Identity. Rural development success in Manitoba and Saskatchewan will be led by the success of the economic and social development of the Indigenous population.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Aboriginal Identity' is derived from three questions in the Census of Population: (a) those who identified as First Nations (North American Indian), Métis or Inuk (Inuit); (b) those who are Registered or Treaty Indians (that is, registered under the Indian Act of Canada); and/or (c) those who have membership in a First Nation or Indian band.

<sup>2</sup> We acknowledge that 'Indigenous' has replaced 'Aboriginal' in most discussions, but in this paper, we are discussing the responses to questions on the Census of Population where the terminology has been 'Aboriginal' rather than 'Indigenous'.

How is the size of the Aboriginal Identity<sup>3</sup> population determined and how have the numbers changed over time? The Canadian Census of Population asks respondents whether they have an Aboriginal Identity. Recent studies have documented the size of the ‘mobility’ of Aboriginal Identity—specifically those who state that they have an Aboriginal Identity in one census period but do not state that they have an Aboriginal Identity in an adjacent census period (see Caron-Malenfant, Coulombe, Guimond, Grondin, & Lebel (2014) and O’Donnell & Lapointe (2019), among others). The flows ‘into’ and ‘out of’ reporting an Aboriginal Identity are sizeable.

Previous studies have not documented the impact of ‘age’ on this flow. Specifically, the net increase in reporting an Aboriginal Identity typically occurs in each age cohort (i.e. period of birth) as they age through time, with one important exception. As individuals age from 15 to 19 years of age to 20 to 24 years of age, there is typically no increase<sup>4</sup> in the number reporting an Aboriginal Identity.

The objective of this paper is to document the different pattern of reporting an Aboriginal Identity by age cohort and to offer some suggestions for future research.

## 2.0 Background

Ethnic mobility or response mobility or change in reporting one’s identity has been observed in many circumstances in Canada and in other countries. O’Donnell and LaPointe (2010) have noted:

Several factors may contribute to response mobility. Previous research about the Aboriginal Identity population has found that having a certain degree of mixed ancestry can be correlated with response mobility. Social factors, legislative changes and court decisions can also have an impact on the way that people respond to census questions. The census form is usually filled in by one person on behalf of all members of a household, and different people may have filled in the form from one Census to the next. A respondent may have newly discovered Aboriginal ancestry and is now identifying as an Aboriginal person. Changes to the question wording or instructions on the questionnaire may influence the way that respondents answer. Even when wording stays the same, the way that people perceive the census categories may evolve and change over time. (p. 3)

In general, each of these factors may be associated with an individual providing a different response in a given census year compared to the response in an adjacent census year.

We focus specifically on the ‘mobility’ of reporting an Aboriginal Identity for individuals who age from 15–19 in a given census to age 20–24 in the following census. The response mobility for these individuals in this age group is different

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<sup>3</sup> Issues of Indigenous Identity are complex and, admittedly, the author does not have this lived experience.

<sup>4</sup> There is also no increase in the 60+ age groups which is due, at least in part, to the number of deaths in each 5-year period (for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians) that would lower the number of individuals with an Aboriginal Identity at the end of each 5-year inter-censal period.

(specifically lower) than the response mobility for each other age group (under 60 years of age) in each of the three intercensal periods for which the census questions related to Aboriginal Identity were essentially unchanged (Caron-Malenfant et al., 2014; O’Donnell & Lapointe, 2019).

Note that many of the reasons for ‘response mobility’ noted above would apply to each age group. The question requiring further research is why ‘response mobility’ is different for those who age from 15–19 years to 20–24 years of age.

### 3.0 Findings

The change in the number of individuals reporting an Aboriginal Identity has increased by more than the number of births in each inter-censal period from 2001 to 2016. From 2001 to 2006, there was a net increase of 87,580 individuals who reported an Aboriginal Identity, in addition to those with an Aboriginal Identity who were born between 2001 and 2006 (see Table 1). In the 2011 to 2016 period, the net increase was 127,445 (i.e., in excess of the 145,645 individuals born between 2011 and 2016 with an Aboriginal Identity).

Various reasons have been offered for this increase (see Caron-Malenfant et al., 2014 and O’Donnell & Lapointe, 2019, among others). It seems that no one has noticed that this trend occurs within every age group (under 60 years of age)—except when individuals move from 15 to 19 age group to the 20–24 age group.

Table 1. *Net Change in Population Reporting an Aboriginal Identity, Canada 2001-2016*

Year	Population with an Aboriginal Identity	Net change from previous census	Aboriginal Identity population under 5 years of age (i.e. born since the previous census)	Net change in Aboriginal Identity population (5+ years of age)
	Col. A	Col. B	Col. C	Col. D = B - C
<b>Population with an Aboriginal Identity</b>				
2001	976,305			
2006	1,172,785	196,480	108,900	87,580
2011	1,400,690	227,905	136,100	91,805
2016	1,673,780	273,090	145,645	127,445

‘Aboriginal Identity’ is derived from 3 questions in the Census of Population: a) those who identified as First Nations (North American Indian), Métis or Inuk (Inuit); b) those who are Registered or Treaty Indians (that is, registered under the Indian Act of Canada); and/or c) those who have membership in a First Nation or Indian band.

Source: Statistics Canada. Census of Population, 2001 to 2016.

In Figure 1, each line shows the number of individuals in a given age cohort (i.e. year of birth) as they age over the census years of 2001, 2006, 2011 and 2016. The lines show that the number of individuals reporting an Aboriginal Identity have increased in each inter-censal period from 2001 to 2016 except when the individuals in an age cohort pass from the 15-19 age group to the 20-24 age group (and except for those 60+ years of age).

Specifically, when individuals move from 15–19 years of age to 20–24 years of age:

- for those born 1981 to 1986, there was virtually no increase (up by 910 individuals) in individuals reporting an Aboriginal Identity (Figure 1 and Table 2);
- for those born 1986 to 1991, there was a decline of 2,655 individuals reporting an Aboriginal Identity; and
- for those born 1991 to 1996, there as decline of 525 individuals reporting an Aboriginal Identity.

Each other age cohort shows a systematic pattern over time of a continuous increase in the number reporting an Aboriginal Identity for those under 60 years of age (see Figure 1).

The Canada-level pattern differs in some provinces. Specifically, the general Canadian pattern of a decline—or no increase—in the number of young adults reporting an Aboriginal Identity is replicated<sup>5</sup> in each of the four western provinces and in each of the northern territories—except for Alberta youth from 2001 to 2006—(see Table 2). In three provinces (Nova Scotia, Quebec and Ontario), there is an increase in each inter-censal period in the number reporting an Aboriginal Identity as they age from 15–19 to 20–24 years of age.

Also, the Canada-level pattern differs by Aboriginal Identity group. The Canada-level pattern is replicated for individuals with a First National Aboriginal Identity and among individuals with an Inuit Aboriginal Identity (see Table 2). However, for individuals with a Métis Aboriginal Identity, there is a decline in reporting an Aboriginal Identity for only one age cohort—those born from 1986 to 1991—as they age from 15–19 years to 20–24 years.

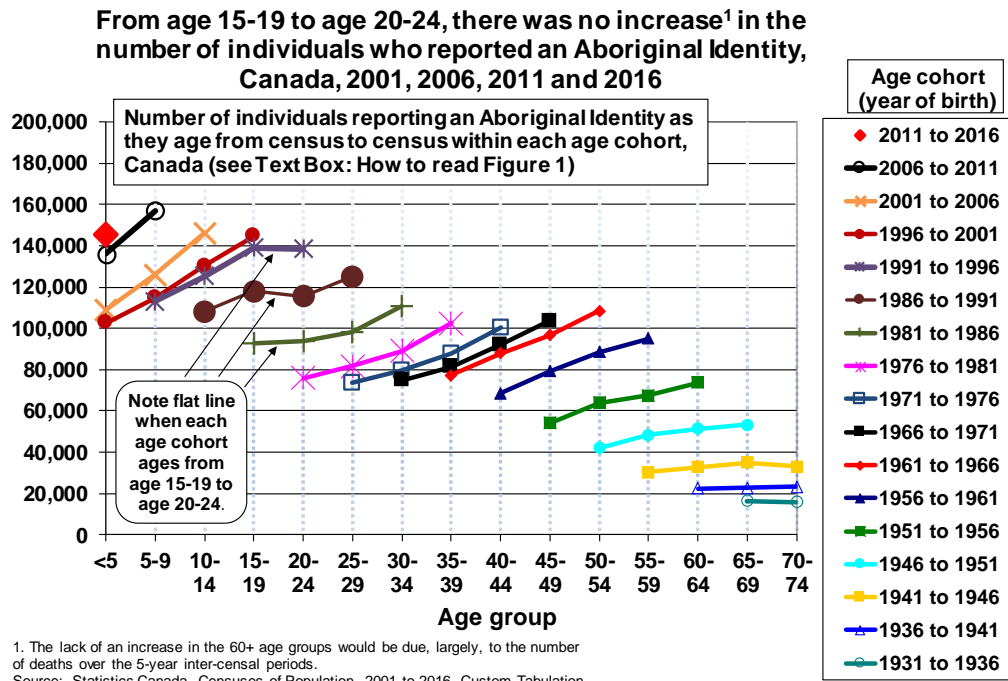
For context, Table 3 shows the pattern for those ages 20–44 in a given census period as they age to 25–49 in the following census period. In each province and territory, these individuals (20–44 years of age in the 1<sup>st</sup> census period) had a higher percent increase in reporting an Aboriginal Identity, compared to those who moved from ages 15–19 to 20–24 in their respective province or territory.

Thus, age matters. Specifically, ageing from 15–19 to 20–24 years of age matters. The trajectory of change in reporting an Aboriginal Identity for those ageing from 15–19 to 20–24 years of age is smaller than for the population as a whole. However, this pattern appears only in Canada’s western provinces and northern territories and only among individuals with a First Nation Aboriginal Identity and an Inuit Aboriginal Identity.

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<sup>5</sup> Data for each province and territory is available in Bollman (2020).

Figure 1. Number Reporting an Aboriginal Identity by Age Cohort (year of birth), Canada<sup>6</sup>.



#### 4.0 Discussion

These results invite a focus for research on how young adults develop or recognize their Aboriginal Identity. Some avenues for research have been identified:

- As noted, the census questionnaire is typically completed by one individual in the household. Most individuals 15–19 years of age would be expected to be living at home and the questionnaire would likely be completed by a parent or another adult in the household. Individuals 20–24 years of age are more likely to be living on their own. They would then complete their own questionnaire when they are 20–24 years of age. Thus, the change in the response to the questions relating to Aboriginal Identity may be solely due to the change in the person who completes the census questionnaire.
- A young adult 20–24 years of age may not know their family ancestry.
- A young adult 20-24 may choose not to be recognized as a person with an Aboriginal Identity.

However, there are certainly other factors that need consideration in the search for the reason why the pattern of change (i.e., ‘response mobility’) for young adults

<sup>6</sup>Each line in Figure 1 shows the number of individuals with an Aboriginal Identity in a given age cohort (i.e. a given year of birth). On the legend, the 7<sup>th</sup> age cohort (listed from the top) shows individuals born between 1981 and 1986.

The data show that the Aboriginal Identity population was 92,990 when this cohort was 15-19 years of age (in the 2001 census), 93,990 individuals when the cohort was 20-24 years of age (in the 2006 census), 98,240 individuals when the cohort was 25-29 years of age (in the 2011 census) and 110,775 individuals when the cohort was 30-34 years of age (in the 2016 census). Thus, each line shows the level and trend of individuals reporting an Aboriginal Identity, within each age cohort (year of birth) as the cohort ages over the four censuses of 2001, 2006, 2011 and 2016.

reporting an Aboriginal Identity is different than the pattern for each other age group—under 60 years of age. One avenue to pursue is the analysis of these specific questions using the linkage of micro-census records following Caron-Malenfant et al., (2014) and O’Donnell and Lapointe (2019).

Table 2. *Number of Individuals Reporting an Aboriginal Identity<sup>7</sup> when they are 15-19 years of age and when they are 20-24 years of age, Canada, Provinces and Territories, 2001 to 2016.*

<b>For individuals 15-19 years in the first period, net change in number of individuals who claimed an Aboriginal Identity<sup>1</sup> in the second period (when they were 20-24 years of age)</b>	<b>As a percent of the number of individuals in the first period</b>					
<b>For individuals born =&gt;</b>	1981-1986	1986-1991	1991-1996	1981-1986	1986-1991	1991-1996
<b>Period when individual moved from the 15-19 age group to the 20-24 age group =&gt;</b>	2001-2006	2006-2011	2011-2016	2001-2006	2006-2011	2011-2016
<b>Province / Territory</b>	<b>Number of individuals</b>			<b>% of total in first period</b>		
Newfoundland and Labrador	-125	355	205	-6	15	6
Prince Edward Island	-20	-25	25	-16	-15	12
Nova Scotia	330	555	1,105	21	23	34
New Brunswick	-380	-25	15	-23	-1	1
Quebec	1,500	1,355	1,270	22	14	11
Ontario	1,970	790	3,205	12	4	11
Manitoba	-155	-1,920	-1,680	-1	-11	-8
Saskatchewan	-1,420	-2,445	-2,140	-11	-15	-12
Alberta	1,010	-165	-675	7	-1	-3
British Columbia	-1,435	-495	-1,320	-9	-2	-6
Yukon	-25	-30	-115	-4	-4	-17
Northwest Territories	-205	-325	-320	-11	-14	-15
Nunavut	-130	-265	-105	-6	-9	-4
<b>CANADA</b>	910	-2,655	-525	1	-2	0
<b>Aboriginal Identity Group</b>						
First Nations (North American Indian)	-3,620	-470	-2,290	-6	-1	-3
Inuit	-90	-260	-380	-2	-4	-6
Métis	4,295	-1,830	1,960	17	-5	5
"Other"	330	-90	180			
<b>Aboriginal Identity: Total</b>	910	-2,655	-525	1	-2	0

<sup>7</sup> ‘Aboriginal Identity’ is derived from 3 questions in the Census of Population: a) those who identified as First Nations (North American Indian), Métis or Inuk (Inuit); b) those who are Registered or Treaty Indians (that is, registered under the Indian Act of Canada); and/or c) those who have membership in a First Nation or Indian band.

Table 3. *Number of Individuals Reporting an Aboriginal Identity<sup>8</sup> When They are 20-44 Years of Age and When They are 25-49 Years of Age, Canada, Provinces and Territories, 2001 to 2016*

<b>For individuals 20-44 years in the first period, net change in number of individuals who claimed an Aboriginal Identity<sup>1</sup> in the second period (when they were 25-49 years of age)</b>				<b>As a percent of the number of individuals in the first period</b>		
<b>For individuals born =&gt;</b>	1951-1981	1956-1986	1961-1966	1981-1986	1986-1991	1991-1996
<b>Period when individual moved from the 20-44 age group to the 25-49 age group =&gt;</b>	2001-2006	2006-2011	2011-2016	2001-2006	2006-2011	2011-2016
<b>Province</b>	<b>Number of individuals</b>			<b>% of total in first period</b>		
Newfoundland and Labrador	1,065	3,625	2,360	14	42	19
Prince Edward Island	190	210	115	45	37	15
Nova Scotia	2,165	2,445	4,805	33	28	41
New Brunswick	-270	1,170	1,525	-4	19	20
Quebec	8,360	8,335	11,065	28	22	24
Ontario	15,375	14,530	18,735	21	16	18
Manitoba	2,900	-110	3,710	5	0	6
Saskatchewan	-650	-1,005	2,275	-1	-2	4
Alberta	5,915	3,870	7,890	10	5	10
British Columbia	4,570	6,805	7,910	7	10	10
Yukon	255	-210	185	10	-8	7
Northwest Territories	180	-420	-590	3	-6	-8
Nunavut	-290	-300	-195	-4	-3	-2
<b>CANADA</b>	<b>39,785</b>	<b>38,890</b>	<b>59,780</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Aboriginal Identity Group</b>						
First Nations (North American Indian)	12,040	25,445	26,070	5	9	8
Inuit	-495	1,125	-320	-3	6	-2
Métis	26,920	12,755	32,345	26	10	22
"Other"	1,300	-410	1,635	45	-10	42
<b>Aboriginal Identity: Total</b>	<b>39,785</b>	<b>38,890</b>	<b>59,780</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>12</b>

<sup>8</sup> 'Aboriginal Identity' is derived from 3 questions in the Census of Population: a) those who identified as First Nations (North American Indian), Métis or Inuk (Inuit); b) those who are Registered or Treaty Indians (that is, registered under the Indian Act of Canada); and/or c) those who have membership in a First Nation or Indian band.

Source: Statistics Canada. Census of Population, 2001 to 2016, Custom Tabulation.



## 5.0 Summary

The increase over time in the number of individuals reporting an Aboriginal Identity has been greater than can be simply explained by the number of births. The trajectory of this increase over time is similar in each age cohort (year of birth) except when an age cohort passes from 15–19 years of age to 20–24 years of age. Age matters in the change in the reporting of an Aboriginal Identity. Further research is required to determine if this different trajectory is due to a lack of knowledge of family ancestry or a preference not to be identified as an Aboriginal person or due to other possible reasons.

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