

ABORIGINAL CENSUS DATA IN CANADA: A RESEARCH NOTE

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Abstract / Résumé

Aboriginal census data in Canada are characterised by numerous structural and administrative problems. This research note examines the problems associated with Aboriginal census data. In particular, the changes of the ethnic question and its impact on total counts in Canada and the Northwest Territories are explored. The analysis indicates that while the total population counts in the Northwest Territories are similar to projected annual population growth, the counts for Canada vary significantly.

Les données du recensement des autochtones au Canada se caractérisent par de nombreux problèmes administratifs et structureaux. Cette note de recherche se penche sur les problèmes en relation avec les informations sur le recensement des autochtones. Les changements qui sont surtout étudiés concernent la question ethnique et son impact sur le dénombrement de la population totale au Canada et dans les territoires du Nord-Ouest. Bien que le dénombrement de la population totale dans les territoires du Nord-Ouest soit semblable aux prévisions de la croissance annuelle de la population, l'analyse indique que le dénombrement pour le Canada varie beaucoup.

Introduction

Within the past four decades, research on Aboriginal Canadians has increased tremendously. While some researchers generate their own data through experiments and surveys, a substantial number of social scientists depend on secondary data for their analysis. The high dependence on secondary data is partially due to strict federal policy on data collection in Aboriginal communities and the cost in terms of time and money in generating such data.¹

The question is, what agencies are responsible for collecting data on Aboriginal people? Do the data reflect the socio-economic aspirations of Aboriginal Canadians? What institutional and structural problems are associated with these data? This research note attempts to answer these questions by examining Aboriginal data in Canada. The focus is on the ethnic question used by Census Canada since 1981 to identify Aboriginal people. The paper attempts to provide an understanding to the changes in the ethnic question and its impact on total counts of the Aboriginal population. In this analysis, national data are compared with those of the Northwest Territories. The first part of the paper examines Aboriginal census data while the second part examines the structural and administrative problems of the data.

Aboriginal People

The term Aboriginal is generally used in Canada to refer to the descendants of the original inhabitants of North America before contact with Europeans (Anderson, 1997). The terms Indian, Inuit and Métis apply specifically to Aboriginal ethnic groups. The distinction between the three groups is not based on biological ancestry but is based on the relationship between the group and early European settlers and later with non-Native Canadians (Bone, 1992). Both Indians and Inuit are believed to have moved into North America several years ago from Asia before Europeans arrived in North America. Indians are further classified into Status, non-Status and Treaty Indians (Bone, 2000). Status Indians are registered or entitled to be registered as Indians based on the 1876 *Indian Act*. After enacting the 1876 *Indian Act*, the federal government took full responsibility over Indian affairs. On the other hand, non-Status Indians are not covered by the *Indian Act* even though they are biologically people of Indian descent. Treaty Indians belong to a Band which is beneficiary to a treaty. The Inuit on the other hand, were not recognized until 1939 when a court ruled that they were also a federal responsibility. The Métis, who represent the off-spring between Europeans and Indians and Inuit, were officially recognized as Aboriginal

people in 1982. Prior to the passage of Canada's *Constitution Act* in 1982, the Métis did not have legal recognition as a separate Aboriginal people everywhere in Canada except Alberta (Peterson and Brown, 1985).

The regional distribution of the Aboriginal population in Canada is very diverse. In 1996, most Native Canadians lived in Northern Canada and the Prairies (Table 1). The Provinces with the highest number of Aboriginal Canadians were British Columbia and Ontario which reported Aboriginal populations totalling about 140,000. This represents about 4% and 1% of the provincial populations of British Columbia and Ontario respectively (Table 1). The highest concentration of Aboriginal people occurred in the Northwest Territories where Aboriginal people accounted for about 62% of the population. The Atlantic provinces and Quebec accounted for about 14% of Canada's Aboriginal population in 1996. For specific ethnic groups, Ontario accounted for a higher number of Indians in the population than any other province. While the Northwest Territories accounted for the highest number of Inuit people, the highest number of Métis lived in Alberta.

Data Sources on Aboriginal Canadians

The federal, provincial and territorial governments are engaged in the collection and analysis of data on Aboriginal people of Canada. An attempt to collect data on Aboriginal people began as far back as 1611 (Goldman and Siggner, 1995). Comprehensive data collection on Native Canadians began in the late 1950s and early 1960s as part of federal programs of service delivery within Aboriginal communities.

Most of these data were administrative data collected and used by government departments or agencies. More importantly, very few government departments who collect these data classify them based on ethnicity (Choiniere and Robitaille, 1963). The two most important government agencies involved in the collection of public data on Aboriginal people which is classified by ethnic groups are Statistics Canada and the Government of Northwest Territories Bureau of Statistics (GNWTBS). While the former is responsible for collecting national data, the latter collects Aboriginal data specifically for the Northwest Territories.

Between the two agencies, the census of Canada provides the most comprehensive information on Aboriginal people of Canada. The census represents an important source of individual level data on Aboriginal Canadians (Wright, 1993). Censuses are conducted every five years in Canada with the most recent census being conducted in 1996. Numerous variables representing a mix of economic, demographic and social conditions of the population are covered in the censuses. The census also offers a more systematic and consistent data collection effort. Chartrand (1993),

Table 1: Aboriginal Identity, 1996

| | Indian | Métis | Inuit | Total Aboriginal | % of Total Population |
|-----------------------|---------|---------|--------|---------------------|--------------------------|
| Canada | 554,290 | 210,190 | 41,080 | 799,010 | 2.8 |
| Newfoundland | 5,430 | 4,685 | 4,265 | 14,205 | 2.6 |
| Prince Edward Island | 825 | 120 | 15 | 950 | 0.6 |
| Nova Scotia | 11,340 | 860 | 210 | 12,380 | 1.4 |
| New Brunswick | 9,180 | 975 | 120 | 10,250 | 1.4 |
| Quebec | 47,600 | 16,075 | 8,300 | 71,415 | 1.0 |
| Ontario | 118,830 | 22,790 | 1,300 | 141,525 | 1.3 |
| Manitoba | 82,990 | 46,195 | 360 | 128,685 | 11.7 |
| Saskatchewan | 75,205 | 36,535 | 190 | 111,245 | 11.4 |
| Alberta | 72,645 | 50,745 | 795 | 122,840 | 4.6 |
| British Columbia | 113,315 | 26,750 | 815 | 139,655 | 3.8 |
| Yukon Territory | 5,530 | 565 | 110 | 6,175 | 20.1 |
| Northwest Territories | 11,400 | 3,895 | 24,600 | 39,690 | 61.9 |

Source: www.statcan.ca, 1998

for example, observed that apart from the census, no other sources of data have a higher standard of consistency in the collection and reporting of data over time.

The census of 1871 represented the first attempt at enumerating Aboriginal Canadians (Table 2). During the early years of enumeration, different terms were used to count Aboriginal people. For example, Indians were referred to as North American Indian or Native Indian while Métis and Inuit were referred to as Half-breeds and Eskimo respectively. Despite the differences in terminology, within the first 100 years (1871-1971) of enumerating Aboriginal people, only single origin responses were required. Other methodological and administrative changes have occurred over the years regarding Aboriginal census data. The most remarkable change was the question on ethnicity which changed from single origin to single and multiple responses in 1981. The census data of Aboriginal people between 1871 and 1971 are therefore unique and different from enumerations that occurred within the past two and half decades. Changing census questions over time is a necessary requirement to reflect current social and cultural aspirations of the people. In preparing census questions, a balance has to be maintained between the current relevance and the historical continuity of the data (Statistics Canada, 1992).

The Aboriginal Census Question

For the past decade and a half, significant efforts have been made to improve the data quality of Canada's Native population (Swimmer and Hennes, 1993). One area in which changes occurred relates to the question on ethnic origin. The question on ethnic origin underwent fundamental changes in the 1981 Census (Goldman and Siggner, 1995). Prior to 1981, the Census did not include multiple responses (Larocque, 1985). Specifically, the question used to identify Aboriginal Canadians in 1981 was "to which ethnic or cultural group did you or your ancestors belong on first coming to this continent?" Respondents with Aboriginal origins were to indicate whether they were Status or registered Indian, non-Status Indian, Métis or Inuit. The question was changed in 1986 and became "To which ethnic or cultural group(s) do you or did your ancestors belong?" In 1991, the question changed again slightly, becoming "To which ethnic or cultural group(s) did this person's ancestors belong?" For the 1996 census, the question asked directly if the person is an Aboriginal person: "Is this person an Aboriginal person, that is, North American, Indian, Métis or Inuit (Eskimo)?" Prior to 1996, census data on Aboriginal people was derived from a question that asked about ethnic origin or ancestry.

Table 2: Aboriginal Population (single origins) 1871-1971

| | Indian | Métis | Inuit | Total Aboriginal | % Total Population |
|-------------------|---------|--------|--------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| 1871 ^a | | | | 102,358 | 2.9 |
| 1881 | 108,547 | | | 108,547 | 2.5 |
| 1891 ^b | | | | 0 | |
| 1901 | 93,460 | 34,481 | | 127,941 | 2.4 |
| 1911 | 105,611 | | | 105,611 | 1.5 |
| 1921 | 110,814 | | 3,269 | 114,083 | 1.3 |
| 1931 | 112,911 | | 5,979 | 128,890 | 1.2 |
| 1941 | 118,316 | 35,416 | 7,205 | 160,937 | 1.4 |
| 1951 | 165,607 | | | 165,607 | 1.2 |
| 1961 | 208,286 | | 11,835 | 220,121 | 1.2 |
| 1971 | 295,215 | | 17,550 | 312,765 | 1.5 |

^a Ethnic question was not included in the 1891 census

^b Total Aboriginal population including unorganized territories

Another change that occurred in 1981 was multiple response to the ethnic question. Prior to the 1981 census, respondents were required to report only paternal ancestry. Thus, each respondent was identified with one ethnic origin. In 1981, significant changes were made by allowing multiple responses. One write-in was provided in the 1981 census in addition to several mark-in boxes. In 1986, respondents were allowed to write in three ethnic origins not included in the mark-in boxes. Respondents were allowed to mark-in a maximum of two ethnic origins not included in the mark-in.

The changes in the ethnic question of the four censuses in the 1980s and 1990s means that care must be taken in comparing these census data. Table 3 shows the 1981, 1986, 1991 and 1996 Aboriginal population figures for Canada and the NWT. Table 4 represents an estimated Aboriginal population based on a 3% annual growth rate. Bone (1992) observed that the natural rate of increase in the Aboriginal population is presently around 3% per year. The change in ethnic classification in the censuses and the desire by Aboriginal people to report multiple Aboriginal origins may explain the substantial differences between the actual and estimated population figures.

Nationally, the large increase in the total number of Aboriginal people from the 1981 to 1996 censuses cannot be explained by natural increase alone (Table 3). Between 1981 and 1986 the Aboriginal population increased about 50% and between 1986 and 1991, the increase was 41.9%. For multiple responses, the change was 365.9% (1981/86), 46.3% (1986/91) and 17.3% (1991/96). The change in the single responses for Canada was more erratic and inconsistent. Between 1981 and 1986, there was a decline in Aboriginal population (-9.7%). On the other hand, there was an increase between 1986 and 1991 (26.1%) and a very small increase (1.5%) between 1991 and 1996. The unusual decline in the single responses may be attributed to the ambiguity created with the implementation of multiple responses. Some Aboriginal Canadians shifted their allegiance from single ancestral descendant to multiple ones.

There is equally a remarkable difference in the responses of the three ethnic groups. Between 1981 and 1986, multiple responses for the Inuit (318%) and Indian (899.7%) population were comparatively much larger than for the Métis (85.2%). The Métis population exhibited a much lower change. However, the single responses were very similar for Inuit (7.4%) and Indian (7.5%) while the Métis recorded a decline (-21.9%). However, the single responses for all three ethnic groups increased between 1986/91. This inconsistency is attributable to the changes in the wording of the ethnic question.

Table 3: Changes in Aboriginal Population, Canada and NWT 1981, 1986, 1991 and 1996

| CANADA | 1981 | 1986 | 1991 | 1996 | Percentage Change | | |
|------------------------------|---------|---------|-----------|-----------|-------------------|-------|-------|
| | | | | | 81/86 | 86/91 | 91/96 |
| Aboriginal Pop. | 491,465 | 737,035 | 1,045,885 | 1,101,960 | 50.0 | 41.9 | 5.4 |
| Single | 413,380 | 373,265 | 470,615 | 477,630 | -9.7 | 26.1 | 1.5 |
| Multiple | 78,085 | 363,770 | 532,060 | 624,330 | 365.9 | 46.3 | 17.3 |
| Inuit Pop. | 25,390 | 36,465 | 49,255 | 49,845 | 43.6 | 35.1 | 1.2 |
| Single | 23,200 | 27,290 | 30,085 | N/A | 7.5 | 10.2 | N/A |
| Multiple | 2,190 | 9,175 | 19,170 | N/A | 318.9 | 108.9 | N/A |
| Indian Pop. | 292,700 | 548,960 | 783,980 | 867,225 | 87.6 | 42.8 | 10.6 |
| Single | 266,420 | 286,230 | 365,375 | N/A | 7.4 | 27.6 | N/A |
| Multiple | 26,280 | 262,730 | 418,605 | N/A | 899.7 | 59.3 | N/A |
| Métis Pop. | 126,130 | 151,610 | 212,650 | 220,740 | 20.2 | 40.3 | 3.8 |
| Single | 76,520 | 59,745 | 75,150 | N/A | -21.9 | 25.8 | N/A |
| Multiple | 49,610 | 91,865 | 137,500 | N/A | 85.2 | 49.7 | N/A |
| Northwest Territories | | | | | | | |
| Aboriginal Pop. | 26,430 | 31,540 | 36,765 | 39,690 | 19.3 | 16.6 | 8.0 |
| Single | 25,325 | 27,175 | 29,415 | N/A | 7.3 | 8.2 | N/A |
| Multiple | 1,105 | 4,365 | 7,750 | N/A | 295.0 | 66.1 | N/A |

Table 3 continued: Changes in Aboriginal Population, Canada and NWT 1981, 1986, 1991 and 1996

| CANADA | 1981 | 1986 | 1991 | 1996 | Percentage Change | | |
|--|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------------------|-------|-------|
| | | | | | 81/86 | 86/91 | 91/96 |
| Northwest Territories continued | | | | | | | |
| Inuit Pop. | 15,910 | 18,355 | 21,355 | 24,600 | 15.4 | 16.3 | 15.2 |
| Single | 15,495 | 17,385 | 18,430 | N/A | 12.2 | 6.0 | N/A |
| Multiple | 415 | 970 | 2,925 | N/A | 133.7 | 201.5 | N/A |
| Indian Pop. | 6,725 | 9,370 | 11,100 | 11,000 | 39.3 | 18.5 | 0.1 |
| Single | 6,520 | 7,580 | 8,665 | N/A | 16.3 | 14.2 | N/A |
| Multiple | 205 | 1,785 | 2,435 | N/A | 770.7 | 36.4 | N/A |
| Metis Pop. | 2,710 | 3,815 | 4,310 | 3,895 | 40.8 | 13.0 | 9.6 |
| Single | 2,225 | 2,200 | 2,320 | N/A | -1.1 | 5.5 | N/A |
| Multiple | 485 | 1,615 | 1,990 | N/A | 233.0 | 23.2 | N/A |

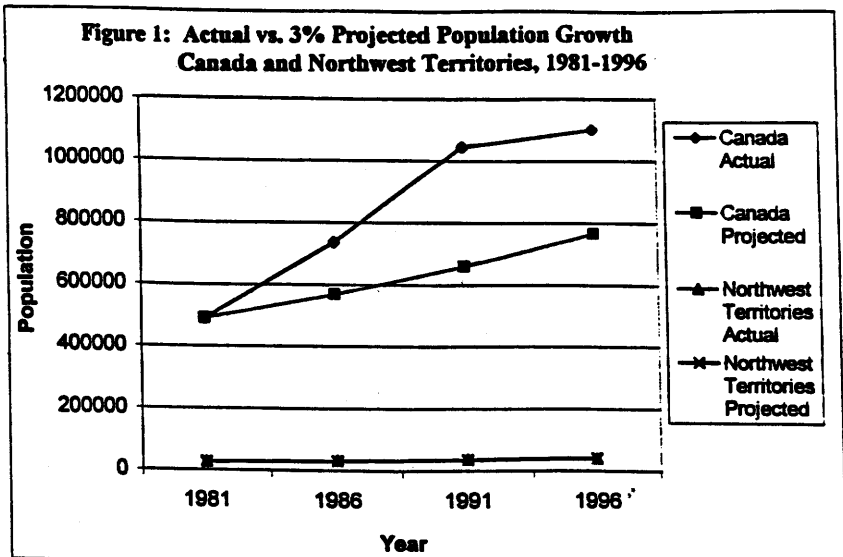
Source: Statistics Canada, 1999, 1993, 1989 and 1984

Table 4: Comparison Between Actual and 3% Projected Annual Aboriginal Population Growth, 1981-1996

| Year | Canada | | Northwest Territories | |
|------|-----------|-----------|-----------------------|-----------|
| | Actual | Projected | Actual | Projected |
| 1981 | 491,465 | 491,465 | 26,430 | 26,430 |
| 1986 | 737,035 | 569,742 | 31,540 | 30,639 |
| 1991 | 1,045,885 | 660,486 | 36,765 | 35,518 |
| 1996 | 1,101,960 | 765,682 | 39,690 | 41,173 |

Source: Projected by the author

In the Northwest Territories, the increase in Aboriginal population corresponds more closely to the 3% natural growth rate (Figure 1). While the actual count of Aboriginal people was 39,690 in 1996, a 3% estimate is 41,173. Between 1981 and 1986, Aboriginal population increased by 19.6% and by 16.6% between 1986 and 1991. However, the changes in multiple responses were also high in the Northwest Territories (Table 2). The analysis suggests that the Northwest Territories was less affected by the changes in the ethnic question (Figure 1 and Table 4).



Assessment of Aboriginal Census Data

Apart from the changes in the ethnic question, census data on Aboriginal people are prone to several other problems. A major census data problem among Aboriginal communities is the suppression or rounding of data because of the small population numbers of many of those communities. The *Statistics Act* requires that information which may lead to the identification of an individual must be kept confidential. One way of doing this is to round off figures to multiples of 5 or 10. The other method is the suppression of the data for geographic areas with populations below certain sizes. For example, income data is suppressed in those areas with populations below 250. In the 1996 census, income data was not reported for Sachs Harbour in the Northwest Territories. With a population of 135, 92% of the population in Sachs Harbour reported Aboriginal ancestry. Swimmer and Hennes (1993) noted that other types of data are suppressed in areas with populations below 40.

Large erratic fluctuations in small populations is a major problem confronting researchers who use Aboriginal community data. Erratic fluctuations in large populations are often negligible and therefore have little impact on the analysis of such data (Akkerman *et al.*, 1997). On the other hand, erratic fluctuations in small populations have significant effects on relative change. For example, 10 adults migrating out of Yellowknife with a population of about 17,275 will not have a significant effect on the proportion of out-migrants compared to the same number leaving Sachs Harbour with a population of 135 people.

The basic values used to determine what data are collected reflect those found in southern Canada's market society. Many census questions therefore emphasize the wage economy. In sharp contrast, little attention is paid to the land-based economy of Aboriginal peoples. This data situation represents a serious problem. For most Aboriginal peoples, hunting, fishing and gathering activities remain important. However, the census does not collect such information. Since the informal sector is an integral part of the Aboriginal economy, it should be recorded. The problem of dealing with the informal sector is purely a methodological one. Those in this sector do not keep a record of their activities. This means that responding to questions on the informal sector will be subjective. For census data collections, the problem is a double-edged one, that is, asking the right question and evaluating the responses.

Furthermore, there is a problem with the type of questions asked in the census. Swimmer and Hennes (1993) outlined extensively the problems of questions on education, work, income, unemployment, housing and family. The authors observed that the definitions provided in the census are

conceptually different from Indigenous definitions. Even though there are legitimate reasons to modify questions to suit Native peoples, some level of uniformity is required for comparison purposes. Constructing questions specifically for a segment of the population poses administrative difficulties.

Finally, translation of census questions and high non-respondent rates in Aboriginal communities poses serious problems. The meaning of census questions may be altered when translated into local languages. The context within which certain words and terms are used can differ significantly from one language to the other. Apart from problems of translation, there is a high rate of non-respondent or under-coverage among Aboriginal Canadians living on Reserves during census. For example, in 1986, census enumerators were refused entry into 136 Indian Reserves and Settlements (Wright, 1993). Similarly, enumerations were not permitted, or were interrupted, on 77 Indian Reserves and Settlements during the 1996 census (Statistics Canada, 1998). This translated into an estimated 44,000 Aboriginal people living on Reserves and Settlements who were missed by the census in 1996.

The problems associated with Aboriginal census data are significant. Finding solutions to these problems may require unconventional approaches to collecting census data on Aboriginal Canadians (Saku, 1995). One approach is to undertake periodic surveys similar to the 1991 Aboriginal Peoples Survey (APS). The APS was an extension of the 1991 census designed to collect data on Aboriginal people on- and off-Reserves (Statistics Canada, 1991). The basic difference between the 1991 Census and the Aboriginal Peoples Survey was that the census recorded Aboriginal ancestry while APS counted those who considered themselves truly Aboriginal (Statistics Canada, 1992). The two enumerations therefore gave different counts of Aboriginal people. While about 1 million people were enumerated as Aboriginal in the 1991 census, 600,000 identified themselves as Aboriginal people in the APS.

As well, the APS differed from the census in that it asked several open-ended questions on Aboriginal housing and economic conditions. Aboriginal people were allowed to provide personal perspectives on these questions. As the survey was specifically designed for Aboriginal people, there are advantages and disadvantages to adopting this approach. One advantage is that questions are structured to reflect Aboriginal society. As such, data on the informal sector can be collected. The disadvantage is that it is usually very expensive to undertake this type of survey. Moreover, for data comparability, the entire Canadian population needs to respond to the same type of questions. The Aboriginal Peoples Survey can be used primarily to verify the accuracy of the census.

The other approach to improving data collection among Aboriginal people is to get Aboriginal people involved in the design of census questions and in conducting the actual census. It is possible that carefully designed and extensive public education campaigns within Aboriginal communities could lead to greater participation in the census.

Conclusion

The goal of every census is to enumerate and provide a detailed information bank on the economic, social and demographic conditions of a population. This goal is only attainable if the population is accurately identified and enumerated. Within Aboriginal communities, the change in the ethnic question over the years has created problems with the total counts. As a result, the total count of Aboriginal people nationally has fluctuated over the years. There are also other problems associated with Aboriginal census data which are structural in scope. For example, information on some variables in small communities is suppressed to maintain confidentiality.

Furthermore, erratic fluctuations caused by relative, rather than absolute, changes in small populations present major problems for researchers using Aboriginal census data. Also, census variables on Aboriginal Canadians generally reflect the formal economy of Canada. For this reason, the variables do not say much about the informal sector of the economy, that is, hunting, fishing and gathering, activities which are often of great importance in Aboriginal communities. Nevertheless, the collection of census data on Aboriginal people has greatly improved in the past decade. For example, to reduce Aboriginal non-participation, Statistics Canada made serious efforts in preparing the 1996 count by involving Aboriginal authorities, advisors and enumerators. This may explain the minimal changes recorded between the 1991 and 1996 censuses.

Note

1. I am grateful for the constructive comments of three anonymous reviewers. The comments of the editor are also appreciated. However, I take full responsibility for all ideas expressed in this paper.

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