DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH
A peer-reviewed, open-access journal of population sciences

DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

VOLUME 53, ARTICLE 6, PAGES 175–186
PUBLISHED 30 JULY 2025
https://www.demographic-research.org/Volumes/Vol53/6
DOI: 10.4054/DemRes.2025.53.6

Descriptive Finding

Trends in Indigenous fertility in Canada, 2001–2021

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Contents

Demographic Research: Volume 53, Article 6
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Trends in Indigenous fertility in Canada, 2001–2021

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Abstract

BACKGROUND
Indigenous peoples in Canada are among the youngest and fastest-growing populations in the country and have had higher fertility rates than non-Indigenous populations.

OBJECTIVE
This paper examines how Indigenous fertility in Canada changed over two decades (2001–2021). It also examines how Indigenous fertility varies across different Indigenous populations and how the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous fertility has changed.

METHODS
The paper uses the own-children method to reconstruct the total fertility rate (TFR) of Indigenous populations in Canada. Data are from confidential long-form Canadian census micro-files from 2000, 2006, 2016, and 2021 and from the National Household Survey of 2011.

RESULTS
First, we find that Indigenous fertility was close to replacement level in 2001, 2006, and 2011 and that it declined below replacement fertility in 2016 to 1.82 and then to 1.54 in 2021. Second, we disaggregate Indigenous fertility and find that the Inuit have the highest TFR among all Indigenous populations. Status Indians had above-replacement fertility in 2001, 2006, and 2011 but as of 2021 have had below-replacement fertility. In contrast, non-status Indians and Métis had below-replacement fertility between 2001 and 2021. Third, although Indigenous peoples have had much higher fertility than non-Indigenous groups in Canada, the gap has narrowed.

CONCLUSIONS
Indigenous fertility has declined to below-replacement levels, moving toward convergence with non-Indigenous populations.

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CONTRIBUTIONS

This research updates Indigenous fertility estimates in Canada over the 2001 to 2021 period, highlighting a broader picture of fertility decline and providing context for international comparisons.

1. Background

Previous research shows that Indigenous peoples in Canada are among the youngest and fastest-growing populations in the country (Statistics Canada 2022) and historically have had higher fertility rates than non-Indigenous populations (Morency, Caron-Malenfant, and Daignault 2018; Trovato 1987). These demographic patterns present important scientific considerations for understanding the population dynamics of Indigenous communities. Many Indigenous communities – both on- and off-reserve – are geographically remote and relatively small, which raises challenges to data collection and estimation procedures. Accurate measurement of fertility in these populations is further challenged by under-coverage, geographic mobility, and complexities associated with Indigenous identification. For all these reasons, it is important to have an accurate picture of Indigenous population change and, more specifically, fertility.

Existing research on Indigenous fertility in Canada shows that it has historically been substantially higher than non-Indigenous fertility, with a great degree of variation across different Indigenous peoples. In Canada, Indigenous peoples include status Indians, non-status Indians, Métis, and Inuit, who are all recognized in Section 35 of the country's constitution. Status Indians are those who are registered as Indians under the Indian Act, a Canadian law that governs the relationship between the federal government and Indians. The Indian Act applies only to status Indians. In 2006, 48.1% of status Indians lived on reserves, which are mostly small and rural communities. By 2021 this number had declined to 40.6% (Siggner and Peters 2014; Statistics Canada 2022). Non-status Indians are people who lost their Indian status through colonial policies and identify as Indians but do not have status under the Indian Act. Some non-status Indians are members of First Nations bands. However, few live on reserves. Métis are of mixed Indigenous and settler ancestry and historically settled in northern Ontario as well as southern Manitoba and southern Saskatchewan. Inuit are Indigenous peoples of Canada's north, including Yukon, the Northwest Territories, and Nunavut (which is a majority Inuit territory). Many Indigenous communities, on- and off-reserve, face both health and socioeconomic inequalities compared to the non-Indigenous Canadian population (Hu, Hajizadeh, and Bombay 2024).

Measuring Indigenous populations in Canada is complex because the country's census largely captures these populations through changing and "fuzzy" measurements linked to different colonial policies over time and by using ethnic origin, self-identification, Indian status, and band membership as criteria for belonging to different groups (Guimond, Robitaille, and Senecal 2015). In the case of non-status Indians, there is also documented shifting in the number of people claiming Indigenous identity (Andersen 2013; Lawrence 2004). While many people lost their Indigenous status due to government policies and were once stigmatized for their Indigenous identities, changing policies in recent decades have reinstituted some people's Indigenous status, and efforts to promote reconciliation have changed the barriers Indigenous peoples face.

The most recent estimate for Indigenous fertility ranges from 2.15 to 2.41 children per woman for the period 1996–2011, compared with 1.51 to 1.66 for non-Indigenous women (Morency, Caron-Malenfant, and Daignault 2018). The total fertility rate (TFR) for the Indigenous population masks substantial variation within the group. For example, in 1996–2001, Inuit women had the highest fertility in Canada (3.4), followed by First Nations (status Indian) women (2.9) and then Métis women (2.2) (Statistics Canada 2006). By 2011 the fertility of Indigenous groups had declined and variation had decreased, with Inuit women having a TFR of 2.7, First Nations women 2.4, and Métis women 1.8 (Boulet and Badets 2017). Aside from having higher overall fertility, Indigenous women also have an earlier fertility age pattern (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada 2012; Boulet and Badets 2017; Ram 2004), with teen pregnancy common among these communities. In 2011–2012, 28% of off-reserve First Nations, 20% of Métis, and 45% of Inuit women had their first child before age 20 (Boulet and Badets 2017). Most of this research is dated, and there is good reason to think that Indigenous fertility in Canada has continued to decline (Morency, Caron-Malenfant, and Daignault 2018; Ram 2004; Statistics Canada 2006). Similar trends have also been seen among Indigenous peoples elsewhere in North America, and in Australia and New Zealand (Johnstone 2011).

Does Indigenous fertility decline mean that Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians are becoming more similar in their reproductive behavior? To answer this question, this brief report first examines how Indigenous fertility changed over two decades in Canada (2001–2021). Second, we examine how Indigenous fertility varies by different Indigenous populations in Canada, and we examine the gap between Indigenous fertility and non-Indigenous fertility.

2. Data and methods

We use the long-form Canadian census micro-files from 2000, 2006, 2016, and 2021 and the National Household Survey (NHS) from 2011 to analyze Indigenous fertility in Canada. The long-form Canadian census contains a 25% sample in 2016 and 2021, and a 20% sample in 2001 and 2006. The NHS was a voluntary survey that replaced the mandatory long-form census questionnaire in 2011 and collected comparable information, but the NHS had a lower weighted response rate (77.2%) than the census in 2006 (93.8%) (Statistics Canada 2015).

Canadian vital statistics birth data do not include information on Indigenous identity. Therefore Indigenous fertility cannot be calculated from birth data alone. Canadian census data are ideal for reconstructing fertility rates because of the large sample size, national representation, and information on households and families. The information about relationships within households and census families can be used for linking children to their mothers and calculating fertility rates by maternal age and characteristics. For measuring total fertility rates, we use data on relationships within census families and age to estimate enumerated children matched with their mothers by single year of age.

We use the own-infant method, an adjustment of the own-children method, to estimate fertility rates for different subgroups. This TFR reconstruction procedure is used to estimate age-specific and total fertility in the period prior to a census or survey (Cho, Retherford, and Choe 1986; Timæus 2021) and has been widely used in estimating fertility rates by ethnic group (Abbasi-Shavazi 1997; Dubuc 2009; Ng and Nault 1997). The own-infant method uses enumerated children aged 0–1 whose mothers are identified and reconstructs age-specific fertility rates a year prior to the census or survey (Ng and Nault 1997). To link infants (aged 0–1) to mothers (aged 15–49), we examine census families. A census family is defined as one couple with or without children or a single parent with children in the Canadian census. Using the census family unit to link children aged 0–1 with mothers yields more accurate matches than matching older children to mothers in the household (Dubuc 2009). To avoid double counting children aged 0–1 in census families, we create an indicator for identifying infants with two mothers in a same-sex family and assign the infant to the younger mother in the family. In coding matched children aged 0–1 in census families, we exclude children living with grandparents with no parent present, children living only with a father, and children not in the census family. After linking infants to their mothers in the census family, we calculate age-specific fertility rates using the weighted numbers of matched children aged 0–1 divided by numbers of women aged 15–49 by single-year age group, as shown in Equation (1). The age-specific fertility rates are then used to calculate the total fertility rates for each census, as shown in Equation (2).

$$\boldsymbol{ASFR_{i,year}} = \frac{\boldsymbol{Birth_{i,year}}}{\boldsymbol{Female\ Population_{i,year}}} \boldsymbol{(15 \leq i \leq 49)} \quad (1)$$

$$\boldsymbol{TFR_{year}} = \boldsymbol{\sum ASFR_{i,year}}\ \boldsymbol{(15 \leq i \leq 49)} \quad (2)$$

We estimate the total fertility rates for each census year for those with Indigenous identity and those without Indigenous identity, as well as for four Indigenous groups (status Indians, non-status Indians, Inuit, and Métis). We use two census variables: "registered or treaty Indian status" and "self-identified Aboriginal identity." Both variables are used to categorize status Indians and non-status Indians. Métis and Inuit people are coded from responses to the self-identified Aboriginal identity question. Examining the fertility of these four groups allows us to examine heterogeneity, which is often missed in studies that look solely at Indigenous groups as one. We exclude respondents with multiple Indigenous origins and those who do not report Indigenous identity but are band members, groups that together make up less than 0.1% of women of childbearing age and therefore do not affect TFR estimates (differences are less than 0.02 births). We conducted additional sensitivity analyses to assess the impact of these respondents on our estimate and found that exclusion of this small group led to marginal differences (see Table 3). Last, to measure the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous fertility, we simply take the difference between the two groups' total fertility rates for each year.

3. Results

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for the number of women in childbearing ages (15–49) by Indigenous population over the study period (2001–2021). The table shows that Indigenous women represented 3.4% of all women of childbearing age in Canada in 2001 and 5.3% in 2021. Within the population of Indigenous women, the largest group is status Indians (45% in 2021), followed by Métis (35% in 2021), non-status Indians (16%), and Inuit (4%).

Table 2 presents the number of infants in each census year, matched and unmatched with the mother in the census family, by Indigenous identity. Of the Indigenous infants in each census, nine in ten live in census families with their mothers and therefore can be matched with them. However, 8%–10% were not able to be matched with a mother and were in other living arrangements – either with grandparents only, with their father, or in a foster home. Of the non-Indigenous infants measured in each census, more than 97%

were matched with their mother, and 2%–3% were living with their grandparents, their father, or in a foster home.

Table 1: Women aged 15–49 by Indigenous population in the long-form census, 2001, 2006, 2016, and 2021, and the National Household, Survey 2011

	2001		2006		2011		2016		2021	
Indigenous population	**260,605**	**3.37%**	**314,205**	**3.99%**	**364,160**	**4.60%**	**418,325**	**5.31%**	**431,895**	**5.33%**
Status Indians	138,060	52.98%	155,495	49.49%	169,400	46.52%	195,390	46.71%	194,205	44.97%
Non-status Indians	28,070	10.77%	34,500	10.98%	55,765	15.31%	56,600	13.53%	67,080	15.53%
Métis	82,835	31.79%	110,545	35.18%	123,425	33.89%	149,570	35.75%	152,920	35.41%
Inuit	11,640	4.47%	13,665	4.35%	15,570	4.28%	16,765	4.01%	17,690	4.10%
Non-Indigenous population	**7,474,150**	**96.63%**	**7,552,430**	**96.01%**	**7,557,560**	**95.40%**	**7,453,055**	**94.69%**	**7,677,300**	**94.67%**
Total	**7,734,755**	**100.00%**	**7,866,635**	**100.00%**	**7,921,720**	**100.00%**	**7,871,380**	**100.00%**	**8,109,195**	**100.00%**

Notes: All estimates are weighted with population weights. The numbers in this table are rounded to 0 or 5 for confidentiality reasons.

Table 2: Matched and unmatched infants aged 0–1 by Indigenous identity and living arrangements in the long-form census, 2001, 2006, 2016, and 2021, and the National Household Survey, 2011

	2001		2006		2011		2016		2021	
Indigenous identity										
Matched with mother	17,495	92.10%	19,635	90.32%	24,175	91.09%	24,925	90.74%	22,295	89.77%
Unmatched with mother	1,500	7.90%	2,105	9.68%	2,365	8.91%	2,545	9.26%	2,540	10.23%
Lives with grandparent(s)	150	0.79%	245	1.13%	255	0.96%	320	1.16%	335	1.35%
Lives in foster home	575	3.03%	770	3.54%	800	3.01%	905	3.29%	845	3.40%
Lives with father	775	4.08%	1,090	5.01%	1,310	4.94%	1,320	4.81%	1,360	5.48%
Total	**18,995**	100.00%	**21,740**	100.00%	**26,540**	100.00%	**27,470**	100.00%	**24,835**	100.00%
Non-Indigenous identity										
Matched with mother	293,245	97.89%	307,550	97.58%	333,210	98.01%	332,995	97.91%	308,700	97.61%
Unmatched with mother	6,325	2.11%	7,630	2.42%	6,760	1.99%	7,095	2.09%	7,565	2.39%
Lives with grandparent(s)	495	0.17%	640	0.20%	625	0.18%	615	0.18%	675	0.21%
Lives in foster home	2,355	0.79%	2,865	0.91%	1,830	0.54%	1,995	0.59%	1,845	0.58%
Lives with father	3,475	1.16%	4,125	1.31%	4,305	1.27%	4,485	1.32%	5,045	1.60%
Total	**299,570**	100.00%	**315,180**	100.00%	**339,970**	100.00%	**340,090**	100.00%	**316,265**	100.00%

Notes: All estimates are weighted with population weights. All the last digits of the counts in this table are rounded to 0 or 5 for confidentiality reasons. Living with grandparent(s) means parents are not present.

Table 3: Sensitivity test for Indigenous TFR, 2001–2021

	2001	2006	2011	2016	2021
Indigenous TFR Under Different Conditions					
Indigenous population shown in main text	2.10	2.08	2.14	1.82	1.54
Indigenous population including those with multiple origins	2.10	2.08	2.13	1.82	1.54
Indigenous population including those who do not report Indigenous identity but are band members	2.09	2.07	2.13	1.82	1.54
Indigenous population including multiple origins and those who do not report Indigenous identity but are band members	2.08	2.07	2.12	1.81	1.53
Indigenous TFR Regarding Unmatched Indigenous Infants					
1: Assuming unmatched infants are evenly distributed among mothers of all age groups	2.29	2.31	2.34	2.03	1.74
2: Assuming unmatched infants are concentrated among mothers aged 15–24	2.29	2.29	2.32	2.01	1.73
Unadjusted TFR	2.10	2.08	2.14	1.82	1.54
Difference with 1	–8.3%	–10.0%	–8.5%	–10.3%	–11.5%
Difference with 2	–8.3%	–9.2%	–7.8%	–9.5%	–11.0%

Table 4 presents the total fertility rates for Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada. In 2001, 2006, and 2011, Indigenous fertility was just around the replacement level of 2.1 births per woman (2.1, 2.08, and 2.14, respectively). Then Indigenous fertility began to decline, reaching 1.82 in 2016 and 1.54 in 2021. Looking across the different Indigenous populations, we see a large degree of variation in fertility rates. The Inuit have the highest fertility, holding steady between 2.3 and 2.6 over the study period. Status Indians had high fertility levels in 2001 (2.45), 2006 (2.39), and 2011 (2.55), similar to the Inuit. However, status Indians have seen more recent fertility decline, reaching 2.11 in 2016 and then dropping to 1.82 in 2021. Non-status Indians and Métis have a different level of fertility than Inuit and status Indians. These two groups had low fertility for the entire study period, with TFRs around 1.6 in 2001, dropping to 1.13 and 1.23 in 2021. In sum, there is a fair amount of variation in the fertility rates of Indigenous populations in Canada, with Inuit with the highest fertility, followed by status Indians and then non-status Indians and Métis with very low fertility.

The bottom of Table 4 shows that the gap between Indigenous fertility and non-Indigenous fertility in Canada shrank over two decades. In 2001 the TFR of Indigenous peoples was 0.63 births higher than that of non-Indigenous people, and this gap has declined to 0.2 births in 2021, showing signs of convergence.

Table 4: Total fertility rates by Indigenous population in the long-form census, 2001, 2006, 2016, and 2021, and the National Household Survey, 2011

	2001	2006	2011	2016	2021
Indigenous Population	**2.10**	**2.08**	**2.14**	**1.82**	**1.54**
Status Indians	2.45	2.39	2.55	2.11	1.82
Non-status Indians	1.60	1.76	1.48	1.46	1.13
Métis	1.63	1.68	1.83	1.51	1.23
Inuit	2.43	2.53	2.40	2.26	2.57
Non-Indigenous Population	**1.47**	**1.54**	**1.6**	**1.54**	**1.34**
TFR for all of Canada	**1.49**	**1.57**	**1.63**	**1.56**	**1.35**
Gap in TFR between Indigenous population and non-Indigenous population	0.63	0.54	0.54	0.28	0.20

Notes: All total fertility rates estimated by the own-child method. Data are from the long-form census for 2001, 2006, 2016, and 2021 and the National Household Survey for 2011.

4. Limitations

There are three caveats to note. First, our analysis does not include infants born in the year prior to the census but dying before the census date. Although there is higher infant mortality among Indigenous populations than among non-Indigenous populations (Sheppard et al. 2017), infant mortality rates are very low in Canada, at 5.2, 5.0, 4.9, 4.5, and 4.3 deaths per 1,000 births in 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016, and 2021, respectively (Statistics Canada 2024). Because previous research shows that results from the own-children method are not very sensitive to the mortality adjustment in countries with very low mortality rates (Abbasi-Shavazi 1997; Cho, Retherford, and Choe 1986), we did not apply the mortality adjustment. Second, it is not possible to differentiate between adopted children and biological children in the Canadian census, so we cannot examine how adoption affects the TFR of Indigenous children. This leads us to the next issue, which is measurement error introduced into our estimates of Indigenous fertility because 8%–10% of Indigenous infants could not be matched to their mothers. We conducted sensitivity analysis to adjust the TFR of Indigenous groups based on two separate assumptions: (1) Unmatched children are evenly distributed across mother's age groups and (2) unmatched children are concentrated among younger mothers. Under both scenarios, adjusted Indigenous TFRs are 7%–12% higher than the unadjusted estimates in our main results (see Table 3). For the non-Indigenous population, the very low rate of unmatched children means this does not bias the TFR estimates.

5. Conclusions

Although Indigenous peoples in Canada had higher fertility than the non-Indigenous population over two decades, the rate differed across Indigenous populations and even fell below replacement for all Indigenous peoples except the Inuit. Fertility of the Indigenous population decreased from 2.1 in 2001 to 1.54 in 2021, a decline of about 27%. However, some subgroups, such as the Inuit, maintained stable and above-replacement fertility between 2001 (2.43) and 2021 (2.57). The gap between the fertility of Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations narrowed from 0.63 in 2001 to 0.2 in 2021, but this gap may be overstated due to measurement error, as 8%–10% of Indigenous infants could not be matched to a mother.

The reason for the fertility convergence observed over the last few decades is not the focus of this brief report. It could stem from social and economic interventions not examined in this paper, such as changing federal government policies, higher rates of education, better access to reproductive health care, and changing rates of self-identification as Indigenous. Trends could be shaped by the "fuzzy" nature of how Indigenous identities are captured in the census (Guimond, Robitaille, and Senecal 2015) as well as, for non-status Indians and Métis, shifting Indigenous identity claims linked to census self-identification (Andersen 2013; Lawrence 2004). For instance, analysis of Indigenous identity mobility shows that 24.6% of those who identified as Aboriginal with Statistics Canada's self-identification question in 2016 had identified as non-Aboriginal in 2011 (O'Donnell and LaPointe 2019). This trend could account for some of the more pronounced convergence of fertility rates for Canada's Indigenous populations.

Irrespective of the reasons behind the shifting fertility patterns observed among Indigenous peoples in Canada, there are a number of potential implications for these changes. Many reserves across Canada will face fewer pressures from population growth considering the relative lower life expectancy of Indigenous populations in Canada compared to non-Indigenous populations (Tjepkema, Bushnik, and Bougie 2019) and may potentially achieve greater sustainability in meeting infrastructure needs and social and health supports. However, if fertility continues to decline and converge with that of the dominant Canadian population for the long run, Indigenous communities might soon face new pressures associated with population decline.

6. Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (Grant 435-2022-0764). This research was conducted at the University of Western Ontario, part of the Canadian Research Data Centre Network. This service is

provided through support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, the Canadian Institute for Health Research, the Canadian Foundation for Innovation, and Statistics Canada. All views expressed in this work are our own.

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