



September 2007 Volume 2, Number 1

School Completion and Workforce Transitions Among Urban Aboriginal Youth

Young people of Aboriginal origin are much less likely to leave school with a high-school diploma or continue on to higher education than other young Canadians, according to sociologists, Paul Maxim and Jerry White. Their studies of students in Ontario, in British Columbia and nationally, have highlighted disturbing differences in drop out rates, in the time it takes to complete high school and in rates of postsecondary education.

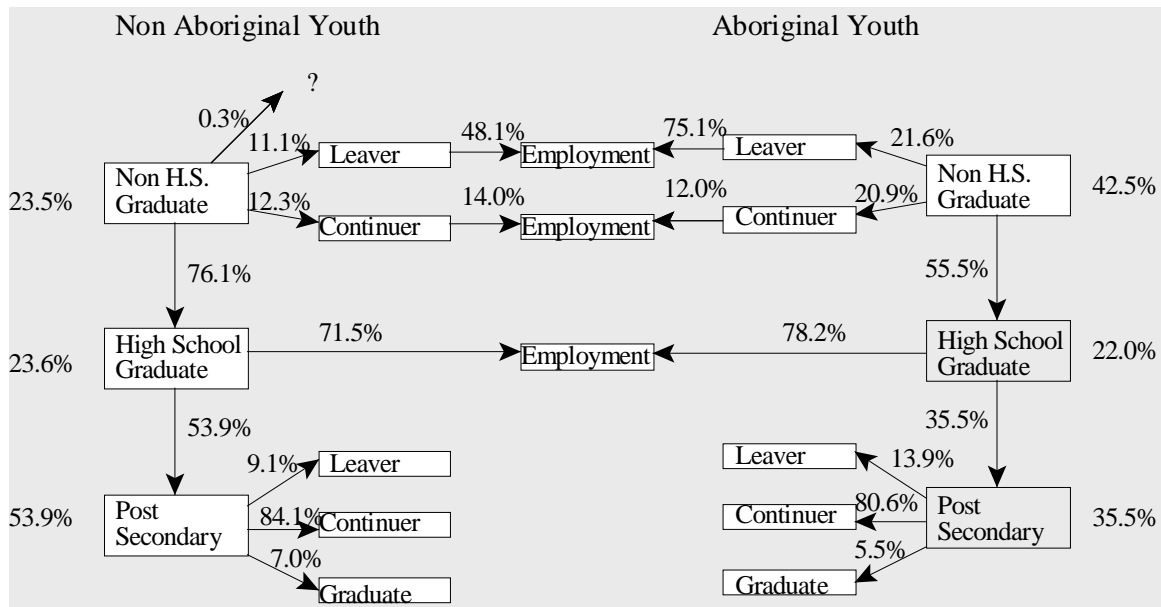
Yet their research also shows that the social and economic return to higher education is particularly dramatic for First Nations people, and the authors are convinced that improving education could prove a key element in reducing the economic disparities between Canada's Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations. Improving education has become a policy priority, aiming to remedy a situation described as "unacceptable" in the Auditor General of Canada's April 2000 report.

Despite progress in Aboriginal education levels in recent decades, however, stronger gains among the non-Aboriginal population means that the education gap is widening. In their latest study, Maxim and White set out to understand why it is that Aboriginal youth continue to drop out of school and why they take longer to complete high school than their non-Aboriginal peers.

Using data from Statistics Canada's Youth in Transition Survey (YITS), the authors trace the educational pathways of young urban Canadians, looking at differences between those identifying themselves as having an "Aboriginal" cultural or racial background with those who do not (although the survey excludes remote areas like the northern territories, or Indian Reserves).

Compared with non-Aboriginal youths, young Aboriginals aged 18-20 years are much more likely to be without a high-school diploma (42.5% versus 23.5%), and much less likely to be in post-secondary education (35.5% versus 53.9%). However, the authors did not find clear patterns in the attitudes and values of parents and children towards education that could explain these differences.

Instead, their study hints at other socio-economic factors that might be more relevant. In particular, they found distinct differences in employment rates between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal school leavers, especially among those without a high-school diploma. Young Aboriginals who did not complete high-school were significantly more likely to be employed (75%) than non-Aboriginal youths in the same situation (48%).



The authors suggest that the higher “quality” of the Aboriginal group of early school leavers is responsible for this. Because fewer Aboriginal students continue with their education, by definition this group contains a higher percentage of individuals with unrealised educational potential than the group of non-Aboriginal early school leavers.

However, the study has a more important message for policy makers concerned with keeping Aboriginal youth in school. School drop out is generally perceived as primarily a problem of the school environment, and policies tend to be directed towards improving what are perceived as the “push” factors that discourage Aboriginal students from remaining in school.

This study, however, suggests that young Aboriginals may also leave school earlier because the job market acts as a “pull” factor for Aboriginal students, whose economic resources are often lower than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. In this case, changing the school environment will only address part of the problem; policy also needs to counter the economic attractiveness of leaving school early. Linking increased family transfer and other support payments to students remaining in school, the authors suggest, could offset the advantages of employment income for young people.

Note: Summary prepared by Heather Juby, Knowledge Transfer Coordinator of the RDC National Coordinating Committee, based on: Maxim, Paul and Jerry White. 2006. School Completion and Workforce Transitions among Urban Aboriginal Youth. Pp. 33-52 in White, J.P., S. Wingert, D. Beavon, and P. Maxim (eds) Aboriginal Policy Research: Moving Forward, Making a Difference, Vol. III. Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing.
 Data for this study came from the Youth in Transition Survey (YITS). The analysis was conducted at the Statistics Canada Research Data Centre. The Research Data Centre program is part of an initiative by Statistics Canada, SSHRC, CIHR and university consortia to strengthen Canada's social research capacity.