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Aboriginal Populations: Social Demographic and Epidemiological Perspectives

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Abstract

This edited collection provides a valuable overview of Aboriginal demography, with a primary yet not exclusive emphasis upon Canadian research. It provides the reader with much insight not only into the major demographic, sociological, and health trends to characterize Aboriginal peoples, but also some of the most serious conceptual and methodological issues that hinder research of this nature. With additional contributions from the United States, Australia, New Zealand, as well as the circumpolar northern regions of Greenland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia, this book also addresses how Aboriginal conditions in these countries may resemble or differ from those in Canada. For this reason, this edited collection is valuable to those who are interested in using demographic, socioeconomic, and epidemiological data as a basis for guiding policy, both in Canada and internationally. The contributions are by and large non-technical in nature and, for this reason, accessible to a wide readership.

Keywords

demography, epidemiology, identity, census, survey research

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Book Review

Aboriginal Populations: Social Demographic and Epidemiological Perspectives

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This edited collection provides a valuable overview of Aboriginal demography, with a primary yet not exclusive emphasis upon Canadian research. It provides the reader with much insight not only into the major demographic, sociological, and health trends to characterize Aboriginal peoples, but also some of the most serious conceptual and methodological issues that hinder research of this nature. With additional contributions from the United States, Australia, New Zealand, as well as the circumpolar northern regions of Greenland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia, this book also addresses how Aboriginal conditions in these countries may resemble or differ from those in Canada. For this reason, this edited collection is valuable to those who are interested in using demographic, socioeconomic, and epidemiological data as a basis for guiding policy, both in Canada and internationally. The contributions are by and large non-technical in nature and, for this reason, accessible to a wide readership.

Demographic research on the Aboriginal population is fraught with methodological and conceptual challenges, and several of the authors in this book explicitly address these sorts of difficulties. Of particular concern in establishing sound policy, or for that matter in documenting social, economic, and/or epidemiological change over time, is the need to clearly delineate a target population for research. Yet, this basic endeavor has been far from straight forward when conducting research on the Aboriginal population of Canada. The simple reality is that a substantial (yet unknown) number of Canadians have some form of Aboriginal ancestry, regardless of how many report in the Canadian census. The Aboriginal population has never evolved in isolation; that is, it has been impacted by a very long history of cultural exchange, mixed unions, intermarriage, and cultural and linguistic assimilation. While demographers have access to high quality data on total population size and distribution of Canadians defined in terms of territory (province or territory, census metropolitan area, census tract, etc.), there are fundamental obstacles encountered whenever attempting to document population size or demographic change for populations defined in terms of ancestry or cultural identity. This has always been true in charting the cultural diversity of Canada's population, and has been shown to be particularly problematic in past efforts to make sense of the demographic history of First Peoples in Canada.

Briefly, there is a substantial element of imprecision that enters into demographic research whenever focusing in on a population defined in terms of ancestry or cultural origin, as ultimately social scientists rely upon how persons might self-report or identify in a census or a survey. Consider a few statistics: The chapter by Goldman and Deli reports that about a half century ago, in 1961, the Dominion Bureau of Statistics (later to become Statistics Canada) documented only about 220,000 persons of Aboriginal ancestry. This was clearly an undercount. Earlier in the 20th century, this figure was even lower, at only about 100,000 in the 1911 Census. Much like with the influence of Canada's First Peoples on the shapes and habits of this country,

it is reasonable to conclude that its demographic weight has also been seriously understated in the historical time series. As was pointed out elsewhere by John Ralston Saul, Canada's history and national identity was initially defined by its "triangular reality" of the First Peoples to inhabit it, and later the French in New France and the British colonists to follow. Yet perhaps just as the cultural impact of First Peoples on Canadian society and its institutions has consistently been understated, so too has its relative demographic weight from a historical point of view.

More recently, this situation has corrected itself. By 1991, the Canadian census reported a near quintupling of this ancestry-based population relative to 1961, up to over 1,002,675. While this book stops at the 2006 Census, let us fast-forward to the 2011 National Household Survey (NHS) and again this figure is up dramatically, to over 1,836,000 million Canadians. In other words, while Canada's total population has grown by roughly 50 percent since 1961, persons reporting Aboriginal ancestry increased by about 9 fold! To add to the complexity of this situation, Statistics Canada moves beyond ancestry to highlight what it calls the "Aboriginal Identity" population in its official publications, with the idea that some persons who report ancestry might not identify as being an Aboriginal person. In the 2011 NHS, 1,400,685 Canadians responded affirmatively to the identity question: "Are you (is this person) an Aboriginal person, that is, First Nations (North American Indian), Métis or Inuk (Inuit)?" The distinction between the "ancestry" and "identity" was first introduced with the 1991 Census, with the rationale that many persons who report ancestry have only a very loose or distant tie with their Aboriginal ancestry. Perhaps unexpected has been the phenomenal growth since 1991 in not only the ancestry-based population but also the identity-based population, up by 83% and 128% respectively.

The chapter by Guimond, Robitaille, and Senécal demonstrates how demography alone (births and deaths) is far from capable of explaining this dramatic population increase. The obvious explanation for the aforementioned growth relates to a shift in the manner in which Canadians "self-identify" in the census (a process referred to by these authors as "ethnic mobility"). Verma's chapter demonstrates how past attempts to project the Aboriginal populations have radically failed, as projection models traditionally consider the impact of birth, deaths, and migration alone. Goldman and Delic point out that while the Aboriginal population of Canada can be thought of as essentially "closed" from a demographic perspective (i.e., it increases only via natural increase, or births minus deaths, and is only negligibly impacted by international migration), it is far from being closed in the sense that other factors beyond "natural increase" impact upon it. While other chapters in this text demonstrate how the fertility and mortality conditions known to characterize First Peoples have contributed to a relatively robust growth rate over time (see Romaniuk's comprehensive historical overview for example), demography alone cannot come anywhere close to explaining this phenomenal growth as observed in official statistics.

In this context, what is the demographer, sociologist, or epidemiologist to do in making sense of demographic data? How does one chart the progress, or lack thereof, of First Peoples relative to other Canadians when the data as available in the census seems to lack temporal reliability? As pointed out by Trovato and Romaniuk in their introductory chapter, an uncritical reliance on census data can potentially lead to incorrect conclusions on the state of socioeconomic improvements in the Aboriginal populations, and possibly lead to wrong policies. For example, while the Aboriginal population might be better educated in 2011 than in 2001, how much of this is due to gains as made among the Indigenous population in completing secondary school and

attending tertiary education and how much is merely due to having a climbing proportion of better educated people reporting Aboriginal identity? While there have been some recent efforts—not mentioned in this book—on the part of Statistics Canada to disentangle some of these changes over time (via record linkage work with the 2001 Census and 2011 NHS), this fundamental problem remains in the time series and can be considered a major obstacle to Canadian researchers.

Other chapters highlight additional difficulties, yet one might add, this book is not forthright in terms of proposing alternatives to the status quo in terms of census data collection. In a particularly critical chapter on past government practices and the manner in which census data has been collected and interpreted, Andersen argues that some of the categories developed by government officials and administrators appear to have almost taken on a life of their own, having more to do with what he labels “administrative convenience” than the measurement of “ancestry or cultural identity.” As a case in point, Andersen considers the census category “Métis,” which in his opinion captures a population that “has no real or no consistent basis of personal affiliation based on culture and belonging.” Andersen may very well have a point in this context—consider the fact that only about 50,000 persons reported Métis ancestry in 1961 (largely in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and northwestern Ontario)—whereas in the 2011 NHS, over 450,000 persons reported “Métis identity,” across virtually all regions of the country. Increasingly, this category appears to have become a catchall for persons who have some mixed European and Aboriginal descent, without carefully distinguishing the nature of this ancestry or identity.

Andersen asks in this context, what “self-identification as Métis in recent censuses might mean,” as a category that in his opinion has “no consistent basis of personal affiliation based on culture and belonging.” This category certainly captures much more than what was traditionally thought of as “Métis culture.” For example, think of the “Métis of Red River, Manitoba or the south branch Métis of Saskatchewan. With regard to these latter groups, we can think of common culture, identified in terms of a shared history, common ties and ancestry, unique language (Michif, with various regional dialects), extensive kinship connections, collective consciousness, and distinct way of life in a specific territory or “homeland.” Contrast this with the category of “Métis” as collected via the census, which for Andersen should not be considered a simple and straight forward form of ethnicity (though it contains elements of ethnicity within it), but more so an artifact of census procedure and measurement.

In terms of policy implications, Peters, Maaka, and Laliberté argue that the reliance upon these broad census categories can become problematic to the extent that “aggregation may result in a lack of support for initiatives that address specific needs and values of specific communities.” While demography is a discipline noted for its success in drawing generalization, there are potential hazards in terms of policy if one overlooks the diversity and heterogeneity of populations. Understood, but what alternative might be proposed? As a recommendation, Peters et al. suggest that the categories available for self-identification of Aboriginal people in the census move to more specific identities. In turn, their chapter is constructive in pointing out that regardless of “census practices” (which asks whether one identifies, in a generic sense, as being “Indian,” “Aboriginal,” “First Nations,” or “Metis”), most persons when directly asked tend to self-identify as being part of specific subgroups (e.g., Cree, Ojibway, Dene, Red River Métis, etc.). In fact, this is demonstrated through their own survey research in Saskatoon.

The argument follows that census collection procedures tend to simplify, or aggregate, which is potentially problematic to the extent that this homogenizes Indigenous identities. Yet, it should be recalled that Statistics Canada also has its ancestry item in the census, which is open ended and does not force persons into specific identities. Persons merely “self-identify” their ancestry, with up to four potential responses collected. Using this information, along with specific geography or territory, it is potentially possible to conduct some rather detailed analyses. The territory now referred to as Canada has always been noted for its remarkable cultural diversity (both before and after colonization by Europe). Yet, this issue of how we can best capture this diversity is far from straightforward, and analysts at Statistics Canada have been struggling with these issues for decades. Inevitably, the census is limited in terms of what is possible, although the ancestry item in itself can potentially complement the Aboriginal identity item in capturing greater detail in terms of culture, ethnicity, and/or ancestry.

Other chapters in this book are more specific in terms of focus: for example, the chapter by Trovato completely bypasses this issue of “identity” by shifting the emphasis to the “Registered Indian” population (i.e., Indigenous persons who for a variety of historic and political reasons hold legal Indian Status by virtue of the Indian Act). Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANCD) currently maintains the “Indian Registry system” (including information on the registration of all births and deaths to Status Indians), which has long allowed for the analysis of past fertility and mortality patterns. Trovato’s analysis demonstrates the utility of this data: He charts the substantial gains that have been made in terms of mortality and life expectancy over the last 50 years, although quite disturbingly, Status Indian life expectancy continues to be 6 to 7 years lower than what is experienced by other Canadians. With the Indian Registry, real demographic change is far easier to chart over time, as inclusion in this dataset is defined in terms of the Indian Act as opposed to “self identification.” Similarly, Voyageur makes reference to this same population as she highlights the gains observed over recent years in terms of education, human capital, not to mention important progress in terms of building more resilient community. While she partially relies on the census, with all of its aforementioned issues, she finds room for optimism in reading the data as available. As she writes, “First Nations peoples have embraced meritocracy and are gaining educational credentials, starting businesses, and being elected into mainstream politics. They are raising their profiles and are working to shatter the stereotypes held by some mainstream citizens.”

Frideres also bypasses these difficulties associated with “identity” or “ancestry” by focusing on language use, which has always been far easier to measure in the census. In turn, the focus of his chapter is on the precarious status of most Indigenous languages spoken in Canada—there is no debating this basic fact. Of the 60 languages, a substantial number are shown to be seriously endangered due to a low level of language transmission across generations. Of particular interest here is his effort to link various structural factors (employment, education, income) to measures of linguistic continuity over time. Other interesting contributions in this collection includes King’s epidemiological study highlighting the so-called “social determinants of health;” whereas Whitehead and Kobayashi’s take a rather different approach with an emphasis upon the more immediate “proximate causes of health” (poor diet, alcoholism) characteristic of specific disadvantaged communities. Young’s chapter on “north-south disparities” draws systematic comparisons across Canada, the United States, Russia, as well as several Scandinavian countries, demonstrating the importance of regional education levels in predicting and explaining health disparities. Other international contributions of note include Snipp’s insightful analysis of

American Indian educational system, as well as contributions by Prout, Kukutai, and Pool on the living conditions and demographic behavior of Indigenous populations living in Australia and New Zealand. The similarities, as experienced by the Indigenous populations across these various settings, can at times be striking to say the least.

In sum, this book is of fundamental utility to those conducting research on Aboriginal populations. Trovato and Romaniuk have brought forward a collection of papers of very high quality, many of which engage the reader in terms of some of the most difficult conceptual and methodological issues to characterize research of this nature. These issues are of fundamental importance to those working with demographic, epidemiological, and socioeconomic data, which in turn has immediate implications to those engaged in policy and administration. Far from ignoring or obscuring some of the more difficult issues encountered in conducting demographic research of this nature, this book takes on these issues head on. For this reason, I consider this book as making an important contribution to the literature and a required reading to researchers, policy analysts, teachers, and students of social demography and Native Studies.

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