



The Dynamics of First Nations Migration Shaped by Socio-Economic Inequalities

About the Brief

This brief is based on Marilyn Amorevieta-Gentil, Robert Bourbeau, and Norbert Robitaille (2015) [Migration among the First Nations: Reflections of inequalities](#), PCLC Discussion Paper 3(1):10.

The brief was written by the authors of the paper.

For more information, please contact [Marilyn Amorevieta-Gentil](#), Université de Montréal, Tel. 514 343-6111 ext 1957.

Target Audience

- ◆ General public
- ◆ Researchers
- ◆ Graduate Students

Summary

Migration by First Nations people (both Registered and non-registered Indians) reflects inequalities between First Nation communities, and also between First Nations and the non-Aboriginal Canadian population, in terms of its nature, its intensity and its direction. Residential mobility, within the same community or urban centre, is the commonest form of migration among First Nations, while inter-provincial and international migration concerns a small minority of cases. The net effect of the migratory flows of Registered Indians is movement towards reserves rather than to other rural or urban areas.

Improvement in living conditions and the feeling of belonging to a community are the commonest motives for Indian migration. Communities may benefit from or be disadvantaged by these origin-destination flows.

Key Findings

The following points apply to First Nations members as a whole, but are not necessarily representative at the community level.

- ◆ The First Nations are a heterogeneous group, in terms of the geographical distribution of their members, their diversity, and also the possession of the legal status of Registered Indian.
- ◆ The widespread perception that reserves are being depopulated is mistaken. Reserve populations are increasing, and their net migration is positive. The Indian urban population is also increasing, because those who are acquiring the status of Indian, or who newly self-identify as such, are mainly located here.
- ◆ Registered Indian men are more inclined to migrate from urban centres to reserves than vice versa. However, women migrate more from reserves to urban centres, and at younger ages than men.
- ◆ Numbers of Indian migrations are low (for example, net migration by Registered Indians, over a five year period, represents about 3% of the total Registered Indian population). The majority of migrations are in fact cases of residential mobility between communities, and (by contrast with the non-Aboriginal population) there are few migrations between provinces or internationally.
- ◆ Propensity to migrate is highest in early adulthood (from 20 to 29 years old), and then declines with age.
- ◆ Among adult migrants, work and education are the main reasons cited for moving to live outside one's community, according to the First Nations Regional Health Survey (2008).
- ◆ Connection with the community is a reason given for returning to one's place of origin.
- ◆ Migration has created urban communities which constitute a bridge between tradition and modernity. These communities are the source of cultural events, collective involvement and innovative forms of solidarity.
- ◆ Migrations involving reserves are mainly by Registered Indians.
- ◆ Policies aiming to reduce socio-economic inequalities within First Nations and between First Nations and non-Aboriginals need to take account of the values of each population.

**Definition: Registered and Non-Registered Indians**

A **Registered Indian** is a person recognised by the Federal Government as registered in terms of the *Indian Act*. All Registered Indians are recorded in the Indian Register, which is the official record held by Canada's Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development. A non-registered Indian, also known as a Non-Status Indian, is a person who declares him or herself to be Indian but without formal recognition. Many non-registered Indians do not qualify for registration in the Indian Register under the terms of the Indian Act, because they are the descendants of two or more successive generations of exogamous unions. On the other hand, some non-registered Indians may have the right to be registered, but have not applied for registration.

Definition: Migration and Residential Mobility

The mobility of a population is defined by movements of people from a former habitual place of residence to a new one, as measured on the day of the national census. The five-yearly census captures this through a question relating to mobility in the past one year or five years. In research on migratory movements of Aboriginal people, persons who have changed community or region are categorised as "migrants" for the purpose of studying migration. Persons who have moved to another home within the same community or the same place of residence are labelled "persons who have moved house", and make up the category of residential mobility. As a general rule, migration is measured over a five year observation period, and residential mobility over a one year period.

The Numbers and Their Distribution

The First Nations are composed of 637,600 Registered Indians (74.9%) and 213,900 non-registered Indians (25.1%). According to the 2011 Census, approximately one fifth of Registered Indians are resident in Ontario (19.7%), and over four out of ten in the Prairies provinces (Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta) (46.6%). Just less than one Registered Indian in six lives in British Columbia (17.6%). Most non-registered Indians live in Ontario (35.3%), Québec (13.9%), British Columbia (19.9%) and the Atlantic provinces (12.6%). Half of Registered Indians live on a reserve. Three quarters of non-registered Indians live in an urban centre, in particular in the CMAs (Census Metropolitan Areas), while a minority of less than 25% live in rural areas, according to the 2006 Census results.

Inequalities between Registered and non-registered Indians vary geographically. Although the former have certain rights and privileges (in some cases linked to residence in a reserve), half of them live in reserves, which are not always close to urban centres. However, it is in urban centres that many services are available. Non-registered Indians, on the other hand, do not have the same rights and privileges, but three quarters of them live in small or large urban centres. Registered Indians living outside reserves, even without the privileges linked to residence there, are better off than Registered Indians living in reserves.

Table 1: Distribution of First Nations by Registered and Non-Registered Status, Canada, Provinces and Territories, 2011

Province	First Nations						Total		
	Registered Indians			Non-Registered Indians					
Atlantic	31 965	5.0	54.3	26 880	12.6	45.7	58 845	6.9	100.0
Québec	52 645	8.3	63.9	29 775	13.9	36.1	82 420	9.7	100.0
Ontario	125 560	19.7	62.4	75 540	35.3	37.6	201 100	23.6	100.0
Manitoba	105 815	16.6	92.6	8 410	3.9	7.4	114 225	13.4	100.0
Saskatchewan	94 160	14.8	91.2	9 045	4.2	8.8	103 205	12.1	100.0
Alberta	96 730	15.2	82.9	19 945	9.3	17.1	116 675	13.7	100.0
British Columbia	112 400	17.6	72.5	42 615	19.9	27.5	155 015	18.2	100.0
Yukon	5 715	0.9	86.7	875	0.4	13.3	6 590	0.8	100.0
North West Territories	12 575	2.0	94.2	775	0.4	5.8	13 350	1.6	100.0
Nunavut	90	0.0	69.2	40	0.0	30.8	130	0.0	100.0
Canada	637 655	100.0	74.9	213 900	100.0	25.1	851 555	100.0	100.0

Source: Statistics Canada (2013, Table 3)



Findings

Migration means moving from one place to another. But it also involves making a transition to a new life. For Aboriginal people, migration goes to the heart of identity. For some groups, migration is a stage in the life cycle, an experience which can be enriching both personally (involving marriage, family, friendship networks and the discovery of a different way of life) and professionally (education, employment, income). The knowledge and experience of migrants may in turn be of benefit to the community of origin. For these reasons, migration is approved of in some communities, while for others departure represents a risk of acculturation or even assimilation. Older people may have a disapproving view of non-Aboriginal society, whose workings and values are seen as a threat to Aboriginal traditions.

It is normal for an individual to aspire to better his lot, and migration may be a means to achieve this. Whether the motivation is to escape from strict social norms, from an abusive relationship, from injustice or poverty, or to obtain better housing or health care, to go to school or simply to find a job, the lights of the city may seem to shine more brightly when one is imagining enjoying better living conditions, in a setting which is poles apart from the familiar daily routine. The will to succeed leads some Indians to successful migration outcomes, while for others excitement slowly gives way to apathy, if they are not ready or prepared to withstand the shock of differences. Prejudice and a clash of attitudes, or lack of communication between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people may breed antipathy and mistrust which undermines effective cooperation. Feelings of personal failure may outweigh the will to succeed, whether the attempt at migration is a single or a repeated one. In the literature on Aboriginal people, this experience of failure frequently involves poverty, instability, criminality, alcoholism, prostitution, unemployment or dependence on social services.

Among the First Nations, residential mobility within the same community or the same place of residence generally accounts for over half of all changes of residence, except in rural areas (Norris & Clatworthy, 2003). The proportion of the non-Aboriginal Canadian population who declared a change of region of residence (a migration) was 16.5% according to the 2001 Census. This propor-

tion was 18.8% for Registered Indians and 23.7% for non-registered Indians. So First Nations people, and particularly non-registered Indians, are changing their area of residence more than non-Aboriginal Canadians (Clatworthy & Norris, 2013). However, net migration of Registered Indians, over five years, represents only 3% of their total population.

Among First Nations, and in particular among Registered Indians, for whom there is more published literature available, men are found to be more likely to migrate from urban centres to reserves. Such movements may be explained by having had a number of disappointing urban experiences (involving precarious housing and employment, low incomes, discrimination and cultural value conflicts). However the opposite trend is seen for women, who make more journeys, at younger ages than men, and mainly towards urban centres (Meloche-Turcot, 2013). The family context is the one singled out by Registered Indian women (Clatworthy, 1996; Clatworthy & Cooke, 2001; Cooke, 2002; Norris & Clatworthy, 2003, 2009; Norris, Cooke, Beavon, Guimond, & Clatworthy, 2004; Trovato, Romaniuc, & Addai, 1994). In fact, age at marriage, age of entry into the labour market or age of becoming a single parent, which are all earlier for women than for men, partly explain this. Better access to educational and health services is also likely to motivate young single mothers to leave their communities. Single parent families are more mobile than married couples. They are also more inclined to leave their communities (Clatworthy and Cooke, 2001).

Table2: Distribution (%) of First Nations by status and region of residence, Canada, 2006

Region	First Nations	
	Registered Indians	Non-registered Indians
Census metropolitan areas (CMA)	23.3	50.2
Urban areas not CMA	17.3	24.3
Reserves	48.1	3.5
Rural	11.3	22.0
All	100.0	100.0

Source: StatisticsCanada, 2006 Census.



Conclusion

Migration plays a major role in the growth of a population and the evolution of its structure. It quickly became the principal cause of the urbanisation of the First Nations. It is important to note that this overall movement is not at the expense of the population in the reserves, and that ethnic mobility towards the First Nations is a significant component of migration. Empirical research has shown that the idea that reserves are becoming depopulated is not well founded, but also that the First Nations do not have the same migration profile as the non-Aboriginal population. Residential mobility is higher among the First Nations, whether within the same community or within an urban centre, while on the other hand inter-provincial and international migration is rare.

This is a complex area of research in which the lack of precise data and of regular surveys which are comparable over time remains an obstacle to better understanding. However, we can say that the appearance of a population, which in the case of the First Nations is made up of many different facets, is always altered by the migration of its members. Migratory flows, however large or small, impact on all the groups of individuals involved. Different levels of government listen to the voices of the First Nations, and are engaged in sustained efforts to reduce the socio-economic inequalities between them and the non-Aboriginal population, through large-scale programmes of education, employment, income support and health, while respecting the collective values of each of these groups. This is a major challenge which has to be met while at the same time ensuring that new divisions are not created.

References

- Clatworthy, Stewart J. and Martin Cooke. *Registered Indian Migration Between On- and Off-Reserve Locations, 1986-1996: Summary and Implications*, Winnipeg, Manitoba Four Directions Project Consultants, 2001, 73 p.
- Cooke, Martin and Danièle Bélanger. « Migration theories and first nations mobility: towards a systems perspective », *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, vol. 43, no 2, 2006, p. 141-164.
- Environics Institute. *Urban Aboriginal peoples study, Main Report*, 2010, 187 p.
- First Nations Information Governance Centre (FNIGC) (2012). *First Nations Regional Health Survey (RHS) 2008/10: National report on adults, youth and children living in First Nations communities*. Ottawa: FNIGC.
- Norris, Mary Jane and Stewart J. Clatworthy. « Urbanization and Migration Patterns of Aboriginal Populations in Canada: A Half Century in Review (1951 to 2006) », *Aboriginal policy studies*, vol. 1, no 1, 2011, p. 13-77.
- Trovato, Frank, Anatole Romaniuc and Isaac Addai. *On- and Off-reserve Migration of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada: A Review of the Literature*. 1994, Ottawa, Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 64 p.