

First Nations and Métis People and Diversity in Canadian Cities

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Commentary by John Richards (Simon Fraser University)

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In this chapter from a forthcoming IRPP book entitled *Belonging? Diversity, Recognition and Shared Citizenship in Canada*, Evelyn Peters examines data from the 1981 and 2001 censuses to assess the degree to which Canada's growing numbers of First Nations and Métis people living in cities are economically and spatially marginalized. Nearly half of First Nations and Métis people now live in urban areas, and this study examines the four cities with the highest concentrations: Edmonton, Regina, Saskatoon and Winnipeg.

Major Findings

- Urban First Nations and Métis people are on average socioeconomically disadvantaged, with higher poverty and unemployment rates, a smaller proportion of high-income households and lower-paying jobs than non-Aboriginal people. Their economic success increased from 1981 to 2001, but the gap between them and non-Aboriginal people has not significantly narrowed.
- First Nations and Métis people are not significantly more concentrated than other urban populations. In 1981, the majority lived in neighbourhoods where they made up less than 10 percent of the population. By 2001, their numbers had more than tripled, but nonetheless over two-thirds of them lived in neighbourhoods where they comprised less than 20 percent of the population.
- Peters counters the widely held belief that urban First Nations and Métis people are concentrated in poverty-stricken neighbourhoods. In Winnipeg, Regina and Saskatoon, they made up between 26 and 34 percent of populations in poor neighbourhoods in 2001. But in Edmonton, only 8.1 percent of First Nations and Métis people lived in poor neighbourhoods, and they made up only 11.5 percent of the total population living there. Peters argues that these numbers (as well as the relatively few areas of concentrated poverty) do not indicate the development of an Aboriginal urban "underclass."

In his commentary, John Richards expresses slightly more concern about increasing geographic segregation. He focuses on trends from 1981 to 2001, over which period the proportion of Aboriginal people living in neighbourhoods where they accounted for more than 10 percent of the population increased substantially in Winnipeg, Regina and Saskatoon. Unlike Peters, he interprets this as a trend toward geographic segregation in those three cities. Richards also points out that urban Aboriginal people disproportionately live in very poor neighbourhoods, particularly in western cities.

Policy Implications and Prescriptions

The most important policy challenge that emerges from these studies relates to the interaction of First Nations and Métis culture with community and urban living. Peters notes that the conventional wisdom about the incompatibility

of urban culture and Aboriginal belief systems has a long history, but the evidence shows that First Nations and Métis institutions can thrive, and are indeed essential, in Canadian cities. In Winnipeg and Edmonton, for example, the number of First Nations and Métis community organizations has grown considerably in the past 10 years, and they form an important infrastructure for advocacy, political representation, community development and delivery of social services.

- Economic development initiatives must endorse the legitimacy of urban Aboriginal organizations by involving them in policy-making. Their links with and understanding of the community can help create effective development strategies and ensure their successful implementation.
- Since many urban First Nations and Métis organizations do not have strong links to national groups, it is unclear how nationally negotiated agreements (such as last year's Kelowna Accord) would trickle down to urban populations.
- Because the socioeconomic gap between urban non-Aboriginal people and First Nations and Métis people is narrowing so slowly, there is a strong need for initiatives to close this gap. However, last year's Kelowna Accord focused relatively little attention on urban Aboriginal people. For example, less than \$200 million of the \$1.8 billion investment in education was directed at urban populations.

Richards also emphasizes that improving Aboriginal educational outcomes is critically important, because it is the key to good wages.

IRPP Comment

The Peters and Richards texts highlight the increasing importance of urban Aboriginal people as a national policy issue. In the past, federal policies have focused on on-reserve Aboriginal people, over whom Ottawa has explicit constitutional jurisdiction. However, as growing numbers of Aboriginal people migrate to cities, the federal government is beginning to adjust its priorities. For example, the 2006 budget allocated \$300 million to the provinces to address off-reserve (and increasingly urban) Aboriginal housing needs.

The chapter also serves as a prelude to a much broader IRPP research program on Aboriginal Quality of Life, the first study of which will be released in November 2006. The program will examine diverse policy areas — including education, health care, community economic development and others — that affect the life chances of Canada's Aboriginal population.