

The Aboriginal Population and the Census: 135 Years of Information – 1871 to 2006

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Short Abstract

The history of formal census-taking in Canada began in 1666 when Jean Talon conducted the first full enumeration of the colony of New France. However, long before the first formal census in Canada, the indigenous population of the territory that became Canada maintained approximate counts of their communities through oral traditions. This paper traces the history of census-taking as it pertains to the Aboriginal Peoples beginning in 1871, the first formal census after Confederation. It is important to understand the context in which the data were collected in order to understand the significance of the results. Some of the basic concepts that define who is an Aboriginal person changed over time, resulting in interesting variations in the published counts of the Aboriginal Peoples in the Census. This paper traces the changes in the context in which the data were collected and ties this to the variations in the published counts. It also discusses the concept of ethnic mobility as an important component to explain variations in counts that can not be explained by natural demographic processes. The description of the context is based on an analysis of the documentation used to instruct census staff during collection and the changes in census methodology over time. The empirical portion of this paper is based on a demographic analysis of the published census data, including public use microdata files where they are available.

Long Abstract

The census has been, and continues to be a major source of population data for most societies. Its scope and impact as a statistical data collection instrument (as opposed to an administrative instrument) is unparalleled since, by design, it touches every person living in a given territory. The significance and impact of census results are equally far-reaching. Governments often make fundamental policy and program decisions affecting people's lives based in part or in whole on counts derived from the census.

The census can be compared to a camera that takes a snapshot of the population at a given point in time. It can also be compared to a mirror that reflects the values of the society at the time that the census is conducted. The content of a census questionnaire, the wording of the questions and the concepts that underlie the classifications used in the data tend to reflect the social and political values at the time the census is conducted. Census counts of Canada's Aboriginal (Indigenous) peoples serve as an excellent illustration of the impact of the changes in social and political values over time on published data.

This paper begins with an historical-context analysis of the census collection instruments from 1871, the first census conducted after Confederation, to 2006, the most current census. As contact with the Aboriginal peoples increased, their social, economic and political relationship with the European immigrants who were populating Canada during this period evolved substantially. An analysis of the collection instruments (questionnaires and instructions given to the census enumerators, where applicable) reflects the nature of the relationship among the inhabitants of Canada and the Aboriginal population at the time the census was conducted. It also provides some insight into the social and political values of the non-Aboriginal society.

This paper documents in detail the changes in concepts, questions, collection instruments and collection methods used to conduct the censuses between 1871 and 2006. The possible impact of changes in collection methods and instruments on population counts is shown in two ways; through an historical analysis of published census data over this period of time and by comparing actual population growth and decline against theoretical models. Given that the Aboriginal peoples in Canada form an essentially “closed” population from a demographic perspective (i.e. there is negligible growth or decline due to non-natural processes), it is possible to compare growth and decline of these groups against theoretical models of population growth. It is expected that these comparisons will expose differences that can not be attributed to traditional demographic flows. In fact, it is likely that these differences are attributed to changes in how the Aboriginal peoples were classified in the censuses that preceded self-enumeration or how they chose to classify themselves in more current censuses.

The conclusion drawn in the last paragraph leads naturally to a discussion on the appropriateness of the standard population equation to measure flows in the Aboriginal population of Canada. It has been shown in previous studies that ethnic mobility serves to explain in part the composition of the error term in the standard population equation (see Goldmann 2003, Robitaille and Guimond 2003, and Goldmann 1998). It is argued in this paper that ethnic mobility is an additional component of flow that should be included in the traditional population equation, especially when analysing the growth and decline of Aboriginal population. The differences between the models of growth for the Aboriginal population and the theoretical models provide empirical evidence of ethnic mobility. Furthermore, the results of the historical analysis of census counts for the Aboriginal population of Canada make it possible to distinguish between two types of ethnic mobility – self-ascribed and imposed.

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