

Loving Our Children: Finding What Works for First Nations Families

Canada Research Chair in First Nations Child and Family Services
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Information Sheet #14

Estimated Counts of First Nations Children Living On and Off Reserve, by Province and Territory

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Accurate information about where First Nations children live is essential because prevention and protection services are funded and delivered differently on and off reserve. The proportion of children living on and off reserve varies considerably, depending on

- the location of the reserve,
- historical patterns of dispossession and migration,
- the availability of housing and services on reserve, and
- the presence of urban Indigenous populations.

Where Can Census Population Estimates Be Obtained?

Estimated counts of the number of First Nations children living on or off reserve can be obtained from the Statistics Canada customizable Census 2021 Table 98-10-0264-01,² "[Indigenous identity by Registered or Treaty Indian status and residence by Indigenous geography: Canada, provinces and territories.](#)"

How is First Nations Identity Defined?

Information on First Nations identity is collected as part of the Long Form Census, which is completed for 25% of private-dwelling households. Question 24 asks the adult

This information sheet is [one in a series](#)¹ about child welfare, written for First Nations developing child and family prevention services as part of the systemic reform underway across Canada.

completing the form to indicate for each member of the household whether they are "First Nations, or Métis or Inuk (Inuit)," and question 26 asks if they are "Status Indian (Registered or Treaty Indian as defined by the Indian Act of Canada)."

Does the Census Count All First Nations children?

First Nations Census statistics should be read as best available estimates rather than exact counts. Not all First Nations communities were fully counted in the 2021 Census, and children who move often or live in unstable housing are more likely to be missed.³ The true number of First Nations children is likely somewhat higher than shown in Table 1 on page 2.

How is On- and Off-Reserve Status Determined?

Living on reserve is determined by the geographic location of the household. All people who have their main residence in the household, even if they are temporarily away, are included. Statistics

Canada classifies a person's residence as on reserve if their home is located within a Census Subdivision (CSD) officially recognized and legally affiliated with First Nations.

What Child Age Ranges are Available?

There is no single, fixed age that defines a First Nations child across all contexts. Instead, the cutoff age depends on the province or territory of residence and the specific program being accessed. The age scope for child protection services ranges from birth up to 16, 18 or 19 years old, depending on the province or territory.

For the purposes of this information sheet, we present estimated population counts for children under the age of 18. However, age groupings in the publicly available tables do not include a 0 to 17 category; instead, they include 0 to 14 and 15 to 19. Using a simple calculation, the number of 15- to 17-year-olds can be estimated by dividing the 15 to 19 count by 5 and multiplying by 3.⁴

What the Numbers Show

- **About one in three First Nations children lives on reserve.** Nationally, 33% of the estimated 337,415 First Nations children aged 0 to 17 live on reserve, and 67% live off reserve.
- **Status and residence are strongly linked.** Nearly all (96%) First Nations children living on reserve are Status Indians: 107,915 of 112,470 First Nations children living on reserve are Status Indian. In contrast, the 98,560 non-Status children living off reserve constitute 96% of the 103,115 non-status children (4,555 on-reserve + 98,560 off reserve).
- **Ontario and British Columbia have the largest off-reserve First Nations child populations.** Ontario has 57,185 First Nations children living off reserve and British Columbia has 40,240, with substantial numbers of non-

Table 1. First Nations Children Aged 0 to 17 Living On and Off Reserve, by Province and Territory, Canada, 2021

Province / Territory	Status Indian			Non-Status First Nations			All First Nations		
	On	Off	% On	On	Off	% On	On	Off	% On
Newfoundland and Labrador	860	3,370	20.3%	35	2,190	1.6%	895	5,560	13.9%
Prince Edward Island	180	135	57.1%	15	285	5.0%	195	420	31.7%
Nova Scotia	3,265	1,465	69.0%	145	3,355	4.1%	3,410	4,820	41.4%
New Brunswick	2,195	1,745	55.7%	110	1,965	5.3%	2,305	3,710	38.3%
Quebec	12,045	6,155	66.2%	320	10,425	3.0%	12,365	16,580	42.7%
Ontario	15,500	24,010	39.2%	820	33,175	2.4%	16,320	57,185	22.2%
Manitoba	24,430	22,130	52.5%	875	6,750	11.5%	25,305	28,880	46.7%
Saskatchewan	21,070	21,145	49.9%	755	5,365	12.3%	21,825	26,510	45.2%
Alberta	15,725	22,810	40.8%	545	12,810	4.1%	16,270	35,620	31.4%
British Columbia	12,580	18,875	40.0%	940	21,365	4.2%	13,520	40,240	25.1%
Yukon	0	1,420	0.0%	0	490	0.0%	0	1,910	0.0%
Northwest Territories	70	3,095	2.2%	0	340	0.0%	70	3,435	2.0%
Nunavut	0	10	0.0%	0	30	0.0%	0	40	0.0%
Canada	107,915	126,385	46.1%	4,555	98,560	4.4%	112,470	224,945	33.3%

Source: Statistics Canada, 2021 Census of Population, Table 98-10-0264-01. Values reflect Statistics Canada's random rounding to protect respondent privacy; columns may not add exactly to row totals. Zero to 14 counts come directly from the table. 15 to 17 counts are estimated as 3/5 of the 15 to 19 count in the same table, rounded to the nearest 5. Zero counts on reserve for Yukon and Nunavut reflect the absence of Indian Act reserves in those territories, where First Nations lands are held under modern treaties or self-government agreements.

Status First Nations children (33,175 in Ontario, 21,365 in BC) living off reserve.

- **Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Nova Scotia, Quebec and New Brunswick have a greater concentration living on reserve.** These provinces show 38% to 47% of their First Nations child populations on reserve, well above the national average.
- **In the territories, First Nations children live almost entirely off reserve.** Yukon (1,910) and Nunavut (40) have no *Indian Act* reserves, while the Northwest Territories counts only about 70 children living on reserve. Most First Nations land in the territories is held under modern treaties or self-government agreements rather than under the *Indian Act* reserve system.

Why These Numbers Matter for Child and Family Services

Child welfare jurisdiction in Canada has historically been split along the on-reserve/off-reserve line. Child and family services for children ordinarily living on reserve or in the Yukon are funded by the federal government through Indigenous Services Canada and are increasingly delivered by First Nations child and family service agencies. Off reserve, services are typically funded and overseen by provincial or territorial governments, even when delivered by Indigenous-led agencies.

An Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families (2019) recognizes that First Nations have inherent jurisdiction over child and family services for their citizens, regardless of where those citizens live. As First Nations move forward with their own laws and service models, the on-/off-reserve numbers in Table 1 are a starting point, not a boundary: most First Nations citizens under 18 live off reserve, and prevention and protection services need to be designed to reach them there as well as in their home communities. The importance of expanding prevention services for children recognized by their First Nation beyond on-reserve residency has been confirmed by a 2020 ruling of the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal.⁵

These population counts also help explain differences in service demand. Provinces with large on-reserve child populations (Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Quebec and Nova Scotia) face different service-planning realities than provinces where most First Nations children live off reserve, often in urban centres (Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia). Effective prevention services—the focus of this information sheet series—must be funded and designed to reach First Nations children and families in both contexts, with culturally grounded supports that follow the family rather than the funding line.

If you would like to share information about a First Nations child and family support initiative in your community, the Loving Our Children project researchers would like to hear from you. LOCwhatworks@gmail.com

Suggested Citation

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Endnotes

- 1 <https://cwrp.ca/loving-our-children>
- 2 Statistics Canada. (2022). *Indigenous identity by Registered or Treaty Indian status and residence by Indigenous geography: Canada, provinces and territories* (2021 Census of Population, Table 98-10-0264-01). Custom filter: First Nations (single Indigenous response) × Registered or Treaty Indian status × Residence on or off reserve × Age (Total 0–14 and 15–19). <https://doi.org/10.25318/9810026401-eng>
- 3 Statistics Canada (2022). *Guide to the Census of Population, 2021*, Appendix 1.5 – Incompletely enumerated reserves and settlements (Catalogue no. 98-304-X). <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/ref/98-304/2021001/app-ann1-5-eng.cfm>
- 4 This is known as *linear interpolation* and can also be used to adjust estimates for other age groups. Note as well that custom tabulations for specific age groups can be purchased from Statistics Canada.
- 5 *Chief Heidi Cook et al. v. The Government of Manitoba et al.*, 2026 MBKB 65 (CanLII). <https://www.canlii.org/en/mb/mbkb/doc/2026/2026mbkb65/2026mbkb65.html?resultId=60ad5ab47e0c4790941b88381168b475&searchId=2026-06-03T15:02:52:644/01859c0d41bf4b7d8a9f5e50ba7a287d>

