



Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study

BACKGROUND AND SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS



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Background

This report is about the future, not the past

In the 2006 Census, a total of 1,172,790 people in Canada identified themselves as Aboriginal persons, that is, First Nations, Métis or Inuit. As of 2006, half of the Aboriginal population in Canada lived in urban centres (including large cities or census metropolitan areas and smaller urban centres).

Urban Aboriginal peoples (i.e., citizens of larger collectives of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples who live in urban centres) are an increasingly significant social, political and economic presence in Canadian cities today – and yet relatively little is known about these individuals' experiences and perspectives. The goal of the *Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study (UAPS)* is to understand better this important and growing population. The *UAPS* is different than any other survey of the Aboriginal population. The *UAPS* does not seek to collect a series of economic and social 'facts' about Aboriginal people living in the city. Rather is it an enquiry about the values, experiences, identities and aspirations of urban Aboriginal peoples. How do they see themselves in relation to their communities – both geographically and culturally? Which factors are leading them toward greater success, autonomy and cultural confidence? What are their hopes for the future, their definitions of success? What tools and supports have helped them? What barriers have impeded them?

Another goal of the *UAPS* is to provide opportunities for dialogue among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. Thus, the study also investigated how non-Aboriginal people view Aboriginal people in Canada today. The *UAPS* also encompasses a pilot study measuring the experiences and success in the lives of National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation Scholars who have pursued, or are pursuing, post-secondary education.

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A respectful dialogue

To accomplish its aims, the *UAPS* included three separate research elements.

- First, 2,614 person-to-person interviews were conducted (the “Main” survey) with First Nations peoples (status and non-status), Métis and Inuit in 11 cities across Canada: Vancouver, Edmonton, Calgary, Regina, Saskatoon, Winnipeg, Thunder Bay, Montreal, Toronto, Halifax and Ottawa (Inuit only). These interviews took place between March and October 2009.
- Second, a telephone survey was conducted with 2,501 non-Aboriginal urban Canadians living in these same cities (excluding Ottawa). This occurred from April to May 2009.
- Finally, a pilot on-line survey of 182 current and past National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation (NAAF) scholars was conducted from June to July 2009.

The Main survey

The *UAPS* research team worked hard to design a study that demonstrated respect for First Nations peoples, Métis and Inuit peoples’ reflections on their values, experiences, identities and aspirations.

More than 100 interviewers, almost all of whom were themselves Aboriginal, talked, in-person, with 2,614 First Nations (status and non-status) peoples, Métis and Inuit living in the 11 Canadian cities.

UAPS participants came from all walks of life. They included men and women from all educational backgrounds, income levels and age groups. The interview process included some structured questions, but also afforded many opportunities for participants to speak freely about their perceptions and experiences; discussions often ran well beyond an hour in length. All responses were carefully and accurately recorded by the *UAPS* research teams in each city.

The *UAPS* touched on many topics. These included (but were not limited to): urban Aboriginal peoples’ communities of origin; Aboriginal cultures; community belonging; education; work; health; political engagement and activity; justice; relationships with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people; life aspirations and definitions of success; and experiences with discrimination.

Previous studies have tended to view Aboriginal Canadians largely through a “problem lens” – that is, simply as targets for social services. The *UAPS* survey sought to fully capture urban Aboriginal peoples as complex individuals and communities. In doing so, we uncovered a broader range of narratives and scenarios than one typically encounters via the news and other media. Many of the survey findings suggest that Canadian cities are becoming sites of connection, engagement and cultural vitality for a large number of Aboriginal peoples.

Although many segments of First Nations, Métis and Inuit populations in Canada face substantial challenges, the picture in cities is more diverse – and in many cases more hopeful – than public perceptions and media coverage often acknowledge. Some of these more positive narratives are highlighted in the summary of main findings on the following page.

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Main Findings

For many, the city is home. Urban Aboriginal peoples retain a strong sense of connection to their ancestral communities or places of origin. These links are integral to strong family and social ties, and to traditional and contemporary Aboriginal culture. Notwithstanding these links, majorities of First Nations peoples, Métis and Inuit consider their current city of residence *home*, including those who are the first generation of their family to live in the city, and also those who most strongly identify as First Nations peoples, Métis or Inuit.

Within these cities, urban Aboriginal peoples are seeking to become a significant and visible part of the urban landscape. They like living in their cities and majorities feel they can make a positive difference in their urban homes. Notably, they are as likely as non-Aboriginal people to feel this way.

Most urban Aboriginal peoples are likely to feel connected to Aboriginal communities in their cities. More than six in ten of those surveyed said they belonged to a “mostly” Aboriginal or “equally” Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community. This sensibility is particularly strong among First Nations peoples and Inuit, but appears true for Métis in some cities as well.

The nature of urban Aboriginal community varies from city to city. Aboriginal communities in urban areas are not simply transplanted non-urban communities. The importance to urban Aboriginal peoples of particular community ties (i.e., family, neighbours, other Aboriginal peoples, Aboriginal services and organizations, etc.) differs somewhat across cities, suggesting their sense of identity and community is shaped by features of the particular city around them.

The city is a venue for the creative development of Aboriginal culture. One of the most optimistic findings from the *UAPS* is the strong sense of cultural vitality among urban Aboriginal peoples in Canadian cities. By a wide margin, First Nations peoples, Métis and Inuit think Aboriginal culture in their communities has become stronger rather than weaker in the last five years. This is particularly true in Toronto and Vancouver, where residents are both more aware of Aboriginal cultural activities in their city and participate in them more frequently.

Furthermore, there is an evident confidence in their ability to retain their cultural identity in the city. While they acknowledge the need for proactive steps to maintain their cultural traditions in the city, they seem fairly confident in their ability to maintain their cultural identity in an urban setting.

Urban Aboriginal peoples aspire to the “good life”. They are most likely to feel that family and a balanced lifestyle are essential ingredients of a successful life; majorities also emphasize the importance of a good job, a successful career and financial independence.

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Pursuing higher education is the leading life aspiration of urban Aboriginal peoples today. This is particularly the case for those who are younger and less affluent. Not only do urban Aboriginal peoples see higher education as a path to a good job or career for their own generation, many say that they hope higher levels of education will be key to how future generations of Aboriginal peoples will distinguish themselves from their ancestors. Those who plan to pursue post-secondary education say that career goals are their main reason for doing so. But interestingly, those who have already completed college or university say the greatest impact of higher education has been to help them feel more empowered – in part by expanding their knowledge of their Aboriginal heritage and identity. Higher education emerges as a passport towards learning more about one’s Aboriginal identity – those urban Aboriginal peoples with a college or university education are more likely than others to claim a better understanding of their Aboriginal heritage and to believe this knowledge has contributed positively to their lives.

While urban Aboriginal peoples may have overcome many barriers to get to the post-secondary level, once they are pursuing their studies the most common obstacle is funding. Perhaps most tellingly, those who started but did not finish their post-secondary degree are as likely as those who did finish to say they received emotional and moral support while in school; however, they are less likely to say they received financial support.

Mentors and/or role models also play an important role. NAAF scholars demonstrate that, after family, the greatest encouragement they received to pursue post-secondary studies came from a role model. (NAAF – the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation – provides tools necessary for Aboriginal peoples in Canada, especially youth, to achieve their potential.) There is also widespread belief among those who currently have or who have had a mentor that this person made a significant contribution to their education. Male scholars are especially likely to say a mentor made a big difference in their lives. Finally, a large majority of NAAF scholars believe positive role models have a big impact on Aboriginal youth.

Urban Aboriginal peoples strongly believe in the importance of formal education, both for themselves and for Aboriginal people generally. Notwithstanding this conviction, most consider education to be more than what is offered in mainstream schools, and through existing degree and diploma programs. They believe that education also encompasses what is taught in Aboriginal schools and “life-long learning” from Elders.

Despite significant cultural and historical differences, First Nations peoples, Métis and Inuit living in Canadian cities share many values and aspirations. One important difference among these groups, however, lies in their opinions about the importance of a strong connection to one’s Aboriginal identity and background and of living in a traditional way. For example, Inuit and status First Nations peoples are much more likely than non-status First Nations peoples and Métis to associate a strong connection to their Aboriginal heritage with a successful life.



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Main Findings

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Nonetheless, urban First Nations peoples, Métis and Inuit alike maintain great reverence for their heritage and express strong Indigenous pride. As one *UAPS* participant noted, “You have to know where you’re coming from to know where you’re going.” This remark captures the sense of family heritage, survival, tradition and identity that participants express when asked to describe the importance of knowing their Aboriginal ancestry. Large majorities are also similarly proud to be *First Nations, Métis or Inuk and Aboriginal*.

Seven in ten urban Aboriginal peoples also say they are very proud to be Canadian, demonstrating that Indigenous pride and pride in Canada are, in most cases, complementary – not mutually exclusive. Nor is a sense of Canadian identity necessarily evidence of “assimilation” into the non-Aboriginal world: those who feel they belong to a mostly *Aboriginal* community in their city are as likely as others to be very proud to be *Canadian*.

Perhaps the clearest example of the relationship between urban Aboriginal peoples’ *Aboriginal* and *Canadian* identities is in the realm of politics. A stronger *Aboriginal* political identity coincides with a stronger *Canadian* political identity. In other words, urban Aboriginal peoples with greater Aboriginal political involvement are also more likely to vote in Canadian elections.

In short, urban Aboriginal peoples today maintain strong *Aboriginal and Canadian* identities, and are forming stable and vibrant Aboriginal communities in Canadian cities. However, they do this despite a widespread belief that they are consistently viewed in negative ways by non-Aboriginal people. If there is a single urban Aboriginal experience, it is the shared perception among First Nations peoples, Métis and Inuit, across cities, that they are stereotyped negatively. Indeed, most report that they have personally experienced negative behaviour or unfair treatment because of who they are.

Conclusion

The *UAPS* has found First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples living within our cities who are striving towards better education, healthier family life, and strengthening their cultures and traditions. The urban Aboriginal experience in Canada’s cities is that there is no contradiction between success, power and knowledge in ‘mainstream’ society, and a strong First Nations, Métis or Inuit culture. On the contrary, urban Aboriginal peoples in Canada’s cities are today proving that these are mutually reinforcing.

Survey of non-Aboriginal Canadians

NA urban Canadians' first impressions of Aboriginal people are generally positive. Only a handful of NA urban Canadians express explicitly negative stereotypes of Aboriginal peoples – although significant minorities in Thunder Bay, Winnipeg and Regina say their own impressions of Aboriginal people have worsened in recent years. At the same time, however, there is an almost unanimous belief that Aboriginal people are the subject of discrimination in Canadian society today. This response, accurately mirrors the stated experiences of urban Aboriginal peoples themselves.

There is a basic tension in the minds of NA urban Canadians about where Aboriginal people fit into the Canadian mosaic. They clearly feel Aboriginal people possess unique cultural identities that other Canadians can learn and benefit from. But NA urban Canadians are divided over whether Aboriginal people should hold unique rights and privileges or whether they should be seen as no different than other cultural or ethnic groups in Canadian society.

There is a general awareness of Aboriginal peoples and their place in Canada's history among NA urban Canadians. However, they know less about the contemporary situation of Aboriginal peoples. Majorities of NA urban Canadians, particularly new Canadians (i.e., those born outside Canada), view Aboriginal history and culture as an important symbol of national identity, and recognize the contributions that Aboriginal peoples and culture have made in the areas of the environment, culture and the arts in Canada. But there is a lack of awareness and apparent uncertainty about the most important issues for Aboriginal people today, and in particular, about the problems faced by those living in cities. There is a significant gap between Aboriginal peoples' socio-economic reality and the perceptions of NA urban Canadians. They believe Aboriginal people have the same or better socio-economic and other opportunities as any other Canadians. Most notably, almost half of NA urban Canadians have never read or heard anything about Indian residential schools, a situation that appears to have changed little following the federal government's official apology in June 2008.

Despite their limited knowledge of Aboriginal people and issues, NA urban Canadians demonstrate a desire to learn more. Indeed, many NA urban Canadians give Canadian schools a failing grade when it comes to educating the population at large about Aboriginal history, culture and experience.

Finally, at some level, non-Aboriginal people are starting to recognize the demographic and cultural presence of urban Aboriginal communities, although this awareness varies substantially by city. Different city histories, the size of local Aboriginal populations, and the nature and location of urban Aboriginal organizations all shape NA urban Canadians' awareness of Aboriginal communities in their cities. Interestingly, those who are aware of an Aboriginal community in their city (i.e., a physical area or neighbourhood, or a social community) are more likely than others to believe Aboriginal people wish both to maintain their culture and to participate in Canadian society.



How do non-Aboriginal urban Canadians ("NA urban Canadians") view Aboriginal peoples?

For more information on the UAPS, please visit www.UAPS.ca



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