



Strategic Research La recherche stratégique

Isolation and Community Well-Being

Key findings:

- Most communities that are less isolated from surrounding populations tend to have higher well-being than those that are more isolated.
- The well-being impact of isolation varies by region: in the Prairies and the Atlantic regions the gap is larger when less isolated, in other regions the gap is smaller when less isolated.
- Isolated or not, First Nations tend to have lower well-being scores than nearby non-Aboriginal communities, which suggests that isolation does not explain the well-being gap.

Introduction

Many First Nations and Inuit communities are isolated. Many of these communities have lower Community Well-Being Index (CWB) scores than non-Aboriginal communities. The Strategic Research Directorate examined the impact of isolation on a community's CWB score by asking three questions:

- Do more isolated communities have lower well-being than less isolated communities?
- Do differences in isolation explain the gap in well-being between First Nations and non-Aboriginal communities?
- Does isolation impact the well-being gap between

First Nations and neighbouring non-Aboriginal communities?

To answer these questions, we first tested whether CWB scores are a result of isolation (question 1). Then we compared First Nations' CWB scores with those scores of nearby non-Aboriginal communities. The goal was to see whether isolated non-Aboriginal communities had the same range of CWB scores as nearby First Nations communities with low scores (question 2). Finally, we examined the well-being gap between First Nations and non-Aboriginal communities at similar degrees of isolation (question 3).

Isolation is measured by 'proximate population'. Proximate population refers to the total population of all cities, towns and settlements within an area 25 km of a specific First Nations or Inuit community. Communities that have larger 'proximate populations' are considered less isolated.

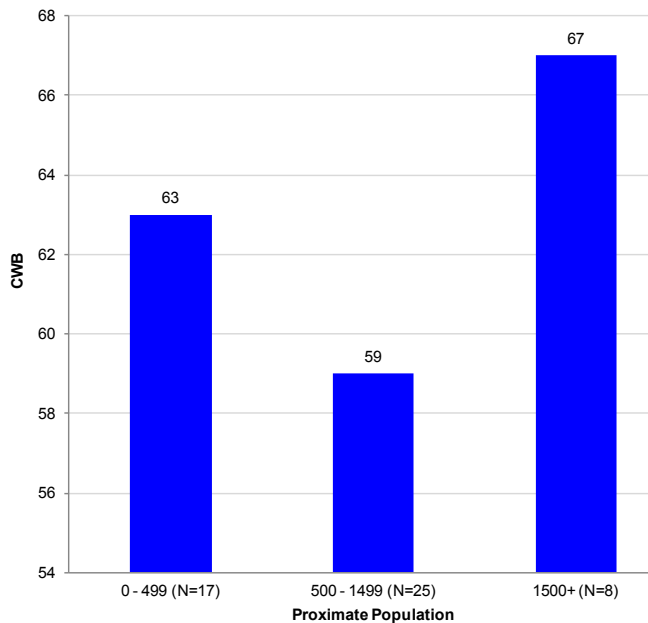
Main Findings

Does isolation affect well-being?

The relationship between isolation and well-being changes in different regions. It was found that:

- Larger non-Aboriginal communities tend to have higher well-being. But this trend is not as strong in the Prairies and Territories.
- The well-being of First Nations communities in Quebec, Ontario, British Columbia and the Territories increases as isolation is reduced. Isolation has little impact on well-being of First Nations in the Prairie

Figure 1: Average Inuit CWB Score by Degree of Isolation, 2006



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2006

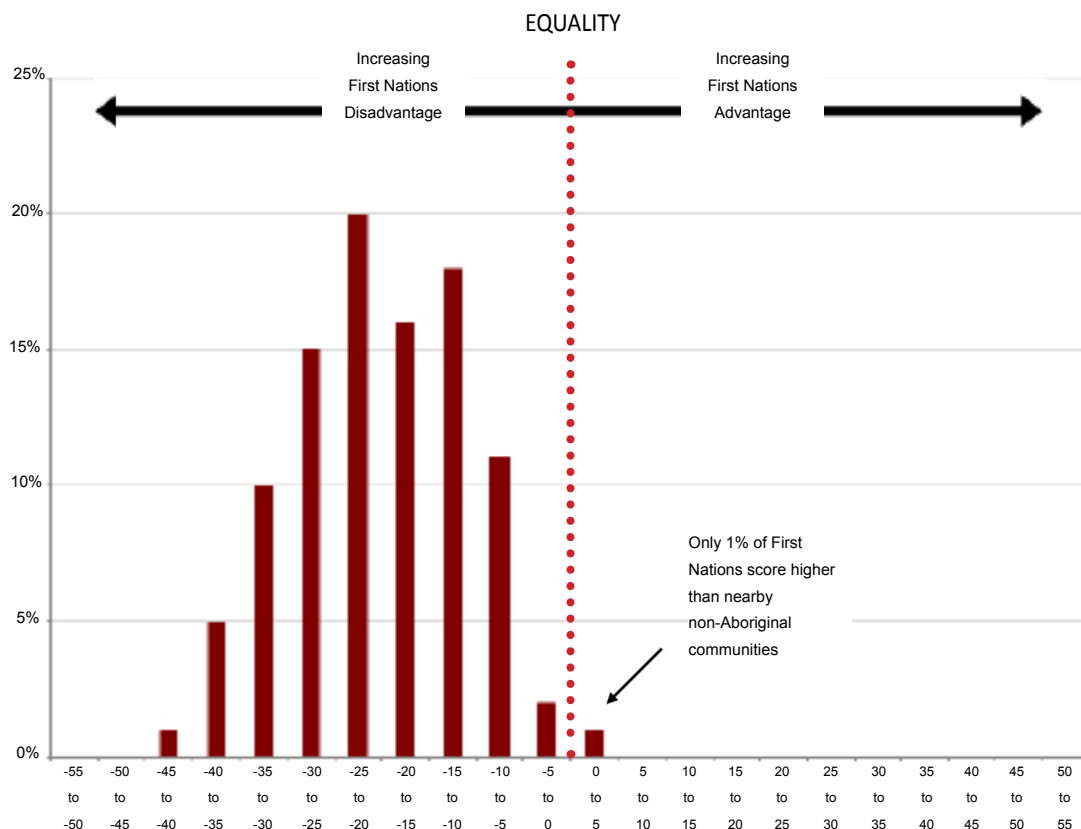
and Atlantic provinces, however.

- All Inuit communities are isolated. The least isolated of them have ‘proximate populations’ of only a few thousand persons. Interestingly, the most and least isolated Inuit communities tend to have higher well-being scores than those in the middle of the isolation range (Figure 1).
- The impact of isolation on the CWB Index’s four components (education, employment, income and housing) differs by community type and region. The positive impact of lower isolation on high school completion rates is consistent.

Do differences in isolation explain the well-being gap?

Ninety-nine percent of First Nations’ communities score lower than the average score for their area. In fact, the average CWB score for all First Nations is 20 to 25 points

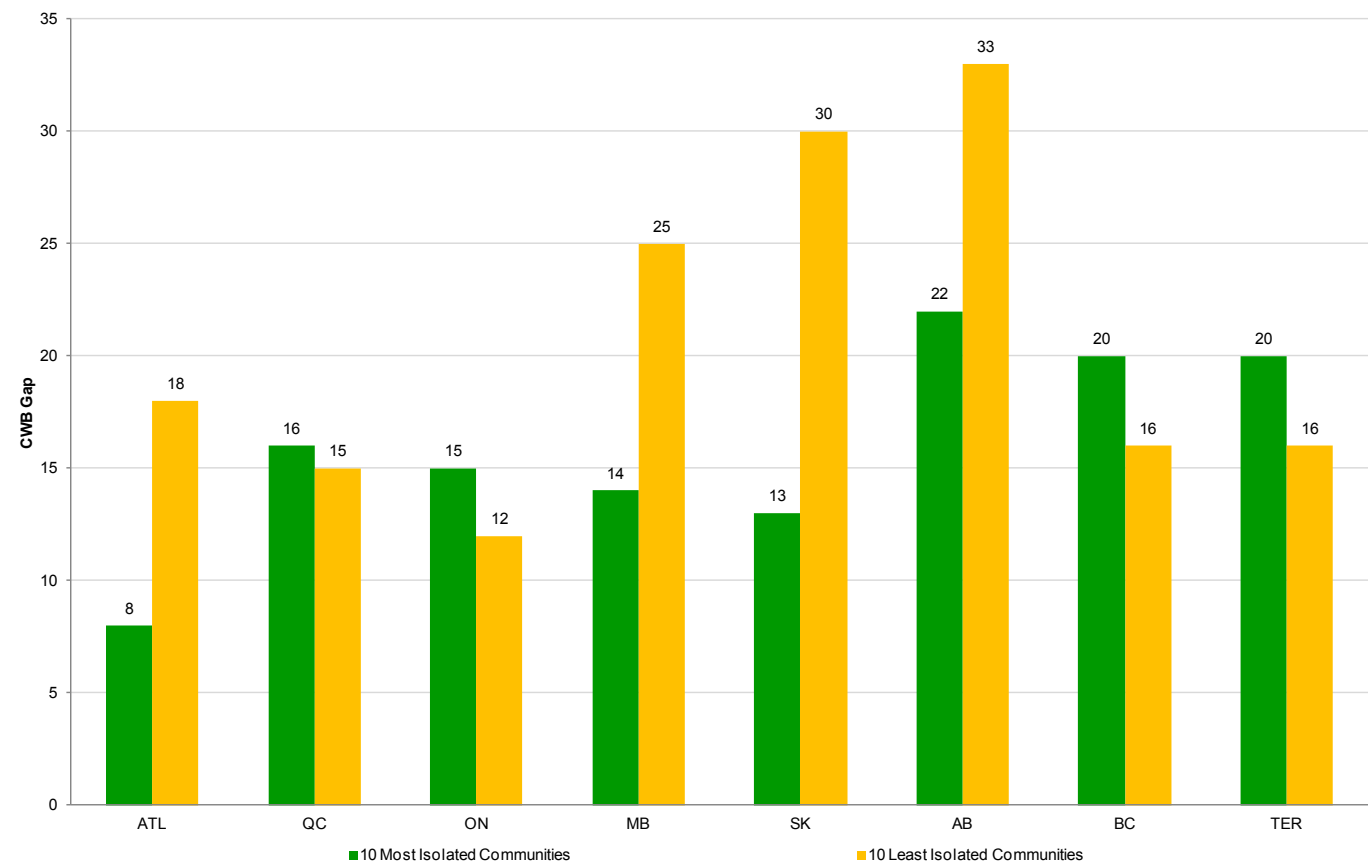
Figure 2: Distribution of CWB Gaps Between First Nations and Nearby Non-Aboriginal Communities, 2006



X Axis: First Nations CWB minus weighted average of non-Aboriginal neighbours.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2006

Figure 3: Average Local CWB Gap in First Nation Communities by Province/Region, 2006



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2006

lower than the average CWB score for all non-Aboriginal communities in Canada (Figure 2). And, 94% scored lower than any of the nearby non-Aboriginal communities. The gap was widest in central Saskatchewan and Alberta, in parts of central British Columbia and in northern Ontario.

This finding suggests that isolation does not explain the well-being gap between First Nations and non-Aboriginal communities.

Does isolation impact well-being gaps between First Nations and nearby non-Aboriginal communities?

The effect of isolation on the well-being gaps between First Nations and non-Aboriginal communities varies across regions. For instance, in Quebec, Ontario, British Columbia and the Territories, the well-being gap between First Nations and nearby non-Aboriginal communities is smaller when in less isolated areas.

In the Atlantic and Prairie regions, however, the well-being gap between First Nations and nearby non-Aboriginal communities is larger in more populated areas. For instance, in the least isolated areas of Saskatchewan the average gap in CWB scores is about 17 points bigger than it is in the most isolated areas. In areas of the Atlantic region, the average gap is 10 points larger for First Nations in less isolated areas than it is in more isolated areas (Figure 3).

Conclusions

In some regions, less isolation results in higher well-being. This is the true for both First Nations and non-Aboriginal communities. However, this does not seem to be the case for First Nations communities in the Atlantic and Prairie regions.

This relationship is different for Inuit communities. The most and the least isolated Inuit communities tend to have higher well-being, while Inuit communities in the ‘middle’

of the isolation range fare less well. However, this finding should be viewed with caution given the small number of Inuit communities included in the analysis.

Some people may think that the average national or regional well-being scores in First Nations communities are lower than in non-Aboriginal communities, because First Nations are isolated. The research results show that this is not the case. The gap persists even when First Nations are compared to their nearby non-Aboriginal communities.

In British Columbia, Ontario, Quebec and the Territories, the gaps between First Nations and non-Aboriginal communities tend to be smaller when less isolated. In the Prairie and Atlantic Provinces, the well-being gap between First Nations and nearby non-Aboriginal communities tends to be larger when a First Nation is located closer to less isolated areas. This suggests a need for more research into the well-being gap to identify the reasons why isolation has different impacts in different regions.

About the researcher

This research brief is based on a report by Erin O’Sullivan entitled “The Community Well-Being Index: Investigating the Relationship between Isolation and Well-Being.” O’Sullivan is a Research Manager at the Strategic Research Directorate, Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada. She has a Ph.D. in Sociology from McMaster University.

A note on methods

Well-being is measured using the 2006 Community Well-Being Index (CWB), which uses data from the Census of Population. CWB scores range from 0 (lowest) to 100 (highest). The CWB measures four dimensions of well-being:

- Education (percent of adults in community that completed high school; percent with a university degree);
- Employment (percent of adults in the labour force; percent employed);
- Income (total income per person in the community); and,
- Housing (percent of community members living in non-crowded houses; percent living in houses that do not require major repairs).

When this research brief was produced the relevant 2011 data had not been released. While the relevant National Household Survey (NHS) data is now available, the comparability of the NHS data to the 2006 data still needs to be verified. AANDC is considering pursuing similar analyses on the impacts of isolation with the 2011 data when its comparability is verified.

About Us

The Strategic Research Directorate is mandated to support the Federal Government’s policy making regarding First Nations, Métis, Inuit and northern peoples in Canada. It does this through a program of survey development, policy research and knowledge transfer.

The Strategic Research Directorate Research Brief series is available electronically on the Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada website, as well as within the federal community on GCPedia. Print copies are available by special request only.

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