

Determining the Inuit Population: Definitional Issues and Differences

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Table of Contents

	Page
Table of Contents	i
List of Table	i
1. Background	1
2. Definitions of “Inuit” and Socioeconomic Characteristics	1
2.1 Differing Definitions of Inuit Ancestry – Pros and Cons	1
2.2 The Inuit “Identity” Concept	2
2.3 Characteristics of the Total Inuit Ancestry, Inuit-only Ancestry, and Inuit and Non-Inuit Ancestry Groups	2
3. Impacts of Changes to Census Ancestry Questions and Reporting Issues	4
3.1 Changes to Census Ancestry Questions and Their Impact	4
3.2 Changes to the Way in Which Census Questions Were Answered	5
References	6
Appendix Census Ancestry Questions: 1981-2001	7

List of Table

Table 1 Selected Key Indicators: Total Inuit Ancestry Population, Inuit-only Ancestry Population, and Mixed Inuit and Non-Inuit Ancestry Population, 2001 Census	3
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1. Background

This report is the first in a series that looks at part of the social, demographic and economic changes experienced by Inuit in Canada over the past 20 years. Based on census information, one of the purposes of this document is to compare and contrast the **total Inuit ancestry**, the **Inuit-only ancestry** and the **mixed Inuit and non-Inuit ancestry** groups. There are many ways to define the Inuit population using data from the Census, with each population having somewhat different socioeconomic characteristics. The second purpose of this document is to explain why the total Inuit ancestry population was chosen as the key population in this series. Finally, this report will focus on how the census questions used to determine the Inuit population have changed over time and on the impacts that these changes have had from one year to the next. Some information on differences in the way people have answered these questions will also be provided.

This report is based on research initially carried out by Jeremy Hull (2002) and has been developed by the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami in collaboration with the Strategic Research and Analysis Directorate (SRAD) of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC).

2. Definitions of “Inuit” and Socioeconomic Characteristics

For the purposes of the present series of reports, the **total Inuit ancestry population** was chosen. This population consists of the sum of two groups. The Inuit-only ancestry group includes those whose ancestors were all Inuit. The mixed Inuit and non-Inuit ancestry group consists of those who had both Inuit and non-Inuit ancestors.

2.1 Differing Definitions of Inuit Ancestry – Pros and Cons

The total Inuit ancestry population was chosen for this report for one primary reason: it is the most inclusive definition. If the Inuit-only population had been chosen, Inuit of mixed ancestry would be excluded and this group of people is more predominant in some regions than others. For example, about one-half (47%) of those with Inuit ancestors in Labrador were of mixed Inuit and non-Inuit ancestry in 2001. In the Northwest Territories, almost 30% of the Inuit ancestry population would have been excluded if the more restrictive Inuit-only definition had been chosen. In both Nunavut and northern Québec, 89% of the total Inuit ancestry population had only Inuit ancestors and as a result only 11% of the total ancestry population would have been excluded if the Inuit-only definition was used (see Table 1 for additional details).

While the total Inuit ancestry population is the most inclusive, it is not without its disadvantages. More specifically, this population has been most affected by changes to the census question from one year to the next. From 1981 to 2001, there were many changes in the way the question on ancestry was asked on the census. While these questions had

little impact on the population that reported having only Inuit ancestors, the impact on the mixed Inuit and non-Inuit population was greater. These changes will be discussed in further detail later in this report.

2.2 The Inuit “Identity” Concept

There is another way to determine the Inuit population that has not yet been discussed. The census Inuit identity question captures those who said they were Inuit (either alone or in combination with North American Indian and/or Métis). While it is possible for someone to have Inuit ancestry but not identify as Inuit (and vice versa), the majority of those with Inuit ancestry self-identify. In 2001, the population with Inuit ancestry stood at 56,190 compared to just over 45,000 for those self-identifying as Inuit.

Many of the characteristics of those who identify as Inuit are closer to those of the Inuit-only ancestry group than the total Inuit ancestry group. For example, in 2001, the median income of those who self-identified as Inuit was \$13,699 compared to \$13,254 for those with only Inuit ancestors. Conversely, for the total Inuit ancestry and Inuit and non-Inuit groups, the figures were \$14,440 and \$16,934 respectively. (Statistics Canada, 2001).

The identity concept was not used for these reports as information from this question was not available until 1996.¹ Since these reports deal with changes from 1981-2001, it was thus not possible to use the Inuit identity concept.

2.3 Characteristics of the Total Inuit Ancestry, Inuit-only Ancestry, and Inuit and Non-Inuit Ancestry Groups

As mentioned above, there are many differences between the Inuit-only and the mixed Inuit and non-Inuit ancestry populations. Table 1 provides information on key indicators highlighting these differences. The age distributions for both are very similar with fairly equal proportions in each of the age groups shown. However, there are important regional differences. For Canada as a whole, two-thirds of the Inuit ancestry population reported having Inuit ancestors only while one-third reported mixed Inuit and non-Inuit ancestry. In Ontario, 85% of those of Inuit ancestry had Inuit and non-Inuit ancestors while at the other end, 11% of Inuit living in northern Québec and Nunavut had mixed Inuit and non-Inuit ancestry.

¹ An identity-based question was asked on the 1986 census but no data were made available due to technical problems.

Table 1
Selected Key Indicators: Total Inuit Ancestry Population, Inuit-only Ancestry Population, and Mixed Inuit and Non-Inuit Ancestry Population, 2001 Census

	Total Inuit Ancestry Population	Inuit-only Ancestry Population	Mixed Inuit and Non-Inuit Ancestry Population
Population size	56,190	36,940	19,250
Age Group (% of the population)			
All ages	100.0	100.0	100.0
0-14	38.3	38.2	38.7
15-24	18.2	18.2	18.3
25-34	15.9	16.1	15.6
35-44	13.1	12.7	13.6
45-54	7.5	7.5	7.6
55-64	4.0	4.1	3.7
65 and over	3.0	3.4	2.4
Province, Territory and Region (%)			
Canada	100.0	65.7	34.3
Atlantic region	100.0	36.7	63.3
Labrador	100.0	52.8	47.2
Québec	100.0	79.4	20.6
Northern Québec	100.0	88.8	11.2
Ontario	100.0	14.8	85.0
Prairies	100.0	25.2	74.6
British Columbia	100.0	20.1	79.9
Nunavut	100.0	89.2	10.8
Northwest Territories	100.0	71.3	28.8
Yukon	100.0	33.3	64.3
North and South (%)			
North	100.0	82.8	17.2
South	100.0	20.9	79.1
Large urban areas	100.0	20.8	79.2
Language % population with:			
Inuktitut mother tongue	52.5	72.5	14.1
Inuktitut home language	43.1	60.5	9.7
Employment (for population age 15 and over)			
Labour force participation rate (%)	64.1	61.2	69.7
Unemployment rate (%)	19.9	22.9	14.7
Occupation (for experienced labour force age 15 and over) % population in:			
Level A occupations	19.2	19.2	19.3
Level B occupations	29.5	27.4	32.7
Level C occupations	29.4	29.1	30.0
Level D occupations	21.9	24.3	18.0
Total Individual Income			
Average income	\$20,699	\$19,125	\$23,696
Median income	\$14,440	\$13,254	\$16,934

Inuit in the north² were much more likely than those in the south to have only Inuit ancestors (83% versus 21% respectively). Those with only Inuit ancestors were much more likely to have Inuktitut as their home language and mother tongue.³ While 73% of this group spoke Inuktitut as their mother tongue and Inuktitut was the home language of 61% of those with only Inuit ancestors, the percentages for the mixed Inuit and non-Inuit ancestry group were much lower – 14% for Inuktitut mother tongue and 10% for home language.

The unemployment rate for those with Inuit-only ancestry was higher than that for those of mixed ancestry – 23% compared to 15% respectively. While the percentage of those employed in occupations requiring the most skill (Level A occupations) were about the same, the Inuit-only ancestry population was more likely to be employed in occupations requiring the least skill (Level D occupations).

Average and median incomes of Inuit-only ancestry were lower than those with mixed Inuit and non-Inuit ancestry, as can be seen in the Table 1.

3. Impacts of Changes to Census Ancestry Questions and Reporting Issues

3.1 Changes to Census Ancestry Questions and Their Impact

The questions from which the Inuit ancestry information comes have undergone a number of changes from 1981 to 2001. The census question for each year is shown in the Appendix. Some of these changes have had an important impact on the data.

In 1981, the census question asked to which ethnic or cultural group the respondents' ancestors belonged. Respondents were neither instructed nor encouraged to check more than one box of the many listed on the census form. The 1986 question was much different. Instead, respondents were asked to which ethnic or cultural group(s) their ancestors belonged. They were then instructed to check as many boxes as applicable. In addition, three spaces were provided where responses not provided could be written in. In 1981, only one space was provided.

² In this series of reports, north includes Nunavut, the Northwest Territories, Northern Québec and Labrador. The area that remains is considered "south".

³ Mother tongue is the first language learned at home in childhood and still understood. Home language refers to the language spoken most often or on a regular basis at home.

The impacts of this change on the Inuit population were significant. From 1981 to 1986, the total Inuit ancestry population increased rapidly from 12,380 to 18,270. The bulk of this growth came from an increase in the number of Inuit reporting more than one ancestry. In fact, this mixed ancestry group grew from 2,155 in 1981 to 9,060 in 1986 – an increase of over 300%.

As mentioned above, the characteristics of the mixed ancestry group are different from those of the Inuit ancestry only group. For example, they are less likely to speak Inuktitut, are more likely to live in the south, have higher incomes and so on. These differences need to be taken into account when interpreting the data for the total Inuit ancestry population.

3.2 Changes to the Way in Which Census Questions Were Answered

Not only did the census ancestry question change from year to year but there were also some changes in the way people answered this question. Earlier unpublished research has shown that in Ontario in 1991, some respondents chose to check **all** boxes provided on that question on the census form. In 1991 in Ontario, 1,595 people reported Inuit, North American Indian and Métis origins compared to zero in 1996 and 40 in 2001. This 1991 phenomenon resulted in a large increase in the Inuit and non-Inuit population in the province and also impacted the national numbers for this group.

In summary, while the total Inuit ancestry population is the most inclusive of the ancestry populations, it is not without its limitations. While reading the reports in this series, it is important to keep these in mind. Similarly, differences in the socioeconomic characteristics of the various Inuit populations should also be taken into consideration.

References

Hull, Jeremy, 2002. "A Profile of the Inuit Population in Canada, 1981-1996." Unpublished report prepared for the Strategic Research and Analysis Directorate, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. Ottawa: INAC.

Statistics Canada, 2001. "Aboriginal Peoples of Canada", Census CD-rom, Catalogue Nos. 94F0041XCB, Tables 97F0011XCB01046 and 97F0011XCB01054.

**Appendix
Census Ancestry Questions: 1981-2001**

1981 Census Ancestry Question

26. To which ethnic or cultural group did you or your ancestors belong on first coming to this continent?

(See Guide for further information.)

<input type="checkbox"/>	French	<input type="checkbox"/>	Native Peoples
<input type="checkbox"/>	English	<input type="checkbox"/>	Inuit
<input type="checkbox"/>	Irish	<input type="checkbox"/>	Status or Registered Indian
<input type="checkbox"/>	Scottish	<input type="checkbox"/>	Non-status Indian
<input type="checkbox"/>	German	<input type="checkbox"/>	Métis
<input type="checkbox"/>	Italian		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ukrainian		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Dutch (Netherlands)		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Polish		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Jewish		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Chinese		
	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other (specify)	

1986 Census Ancestry Question

17. To which ethnic or cultural group(s) do you or did your ancestors belong?
(See Guide)

Mark or specify as many as applicable.

- French
- English
- Irish
- Scottish
- German
- Italian
- Ukrainian
- Dutch (Netherlands)
- Polish
- Chinese
- Jewish
- Black
- Inuit
- North American Indian
- Métis

Other ethnic or cultural group(s). For example, Portuguese, Greek, Indian (India), Pakistani, Filipino, Japanese, Vietnamese (specify below).

- Other (specify)
- Other (specify)
- Other (specify)

1991 Census Ancestry Question

Ethnic Origin

15. To which ethnic or cultural group(s) did this person's ancestor belong?

Mark or specify as many applicable.

Note:

While most people of Canada view themselves as Canadian, information about their ancestral origins has been collected since the 1901 Census to reflect the changing composition of the Canadian population and is needed to ensure that everyone, regardless of his/her ethnic or cultural background, has **equal opportunity** to share fully in the economic, social, cultural and political life of Canada. Therefore, this question refers to the origins of this person's **ancestors**.

See Guide

- French
- English
- German
- Scottish
- Italian
- Irish
- Ukrainian
- Chinese
- Dutch (Netherlands)
- Jewish
- Polish
- Black
- North American Indian
- Métis
- Inuit/ Eskimo

Other ethnic or cultural group(s)- Specify

Examples of other ethnic or cultural groups are: Portuguese, Greek, Indian from India, Pakistani, Filipino, Vietnamese, Japanese, Lebanese, Haitian, etc.

1996 Census Ancestry Question

Ethnic Origin		
17.	To which ethnic or cultural group(s) did this person's ancestors belong?	Specify as many groups as applicable.
	<i>For example, French, English, German, Scottish, Canadian, Irish, Italian, Chinese, Cree, Micmac, Métis, Inuit (Eskimo), Ukrainian, Dutch, East Indian, Polish, Portuguese, Jewish, Haitian, Jamaican, Vietnamese, Lebanese, Chilean, Somali, etc.</i>	<input type="text"/>
		<input type="text"/>
		<input type="text"/>
		<input type="text"/>

2001 Census Ancestry Question

While most people in Canada view themselves as Canadians, information on their ancestral origins has been collected since the 1901 Census to capture the changing composition of Canada's diverse population. Therefore, this question refers to the origins of the person's ancestors .		
17.	To which ethnic or cultural group(s) did this person's ancestors belong?	Specify as many groups as applicable.
	<i>For example, Canadian, French, English, Chinese, Italian, German, Scottish, Irish, Cree, Micmac, Métis, Inuit (Eskimo), East Indian, Ukrainian, Dutch, Polish, Portuguese, Filipino, Jewish, Greek, Jamaican, Vietnamese, Lebanese, Chilean, Somali, etc.</i>	19 <input type="text"/>
		20 <input type="text"/>
		21 <input type="text"/>
		22 <input type="text"/>