

Census in Brief

Aboriginal languages in Canada



Language, 2011 Census of Population

Over 60 Aboriginal languages reported in 2011

The 2011 Census of Population recorded over 60 Aboriginal languages grouped into 12 distinct language families – an indication of the diversity of Aboriginal languages in Canada.¹

According to the 2011 Census, almost 213,500 people reported an Aboriginal mother tongue and nearly 213,400 people reported speaking an Aboriginal language most often or regularly at home.^{2,3}

Largest Aboriginal language family is Algonquian

The Aboriginal language family with the largest number of people was Algonquian. A total of 144,015 people reported a mother tongue belonging to this language family ([Table 1](#)). The Algonquian languages most often reported in 2011 as mother tongues were the Cree languages⁴ (83,475), Ojibway (19,275), Innu/Montagnais (10,965) and Oji-Cree (10,180).

People reporting a mother tongue belonging to the Algonquian language family lived across Canada. For example, people with the Cree languages as their mother tongue lived mainly in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Alberta or Quebec. Those with Ojibway or Oji-Cree mother tongues were mainly located in Ontario or Manitoba, while those whose mother tongue was Innu/Montagnais or Atikamekw (5,915) lived mostly in Quebec.

Also included in the Algonquian language family were people who reported Mi'kmaq (8,030) who lived mainly in Nova Scotia or New Brunswick, and those who reported Blackfoot (3,250) as their mother tongue and who primarily lived in Alberta.

Inuit and Athapaskan languages also frequently reported

The Inuit and the Athapaskan languages were the second (35,500) and third (20,700) language families with the largest populations in 2011.

Inuktitut (34,110) was by far the most frequently reported mother tongue within the Inuit language family. People with Inuktitut as their mother tongue lived mainly in Nunavut or Quebec.

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1. Specific information on Aboriginal people and the ability to speak an Aboriginal language from the 2011 National Household Survey will be released and available in 2013.
 2. Counts for mother tongue and home language in this document include single response of an Aboriginal language as well as multiple responses of an Aboriginal language with English and/or French. Please refer to [Box Concepts and definitions](#) at the end of the document for concepts and definitions.
 3. In 2011, there were a total of 31 Indian reserves and Indian settlements that were 'incompletely enumerated.' For these reserves or settlements, enumeration was either not permitted or was interrupted before it could be completed, or enumeration was not possible because of natural events (specifically forest fires in Northern Ontario). Data for these 31 Indian reserves and Indian settlements are not included in the 2011 Census tabulations. As a result, counts for certain Aboriginal languages may be underestimated.
 4. Cree languages include the following categories: Cree not otherwise specified (which refers to those who reported 'Cree'), Swampy Cree, Plains Cree, Woods Cree, and a category labelled 'Cree not included elsewhere' (which includes Moose Cree, Northern East Cree and Southern East Cree). To obtain counts on these five specific language categories, please see the [Language Topic-based tabulations](#).

Among the Athapaskan family, Dene (11,860) was most frequently reported as mother tongue. Nearly 71% of people who reported Dene as mother tongue lived in Saskatchewan.

The other nine Aboriginal language families accounted for about 6% of the population who reported an Aboriginal mother tongue. Five of these families (Salish, Tsimshian, Wakashan, Kutenai and Haida) were primarily found in British Columbia. This province is home to over 30 different Aboriginal mother tongues, most reported by less than 1,000 people each.

Michif, the traditional language of the Métis, was reported as mother tongue by 640 people living mainly in Saskatchewan, Manitoba or Alberta.

Cree languages, Inuktitut and Ojibway are the most frequently reported Aboriginal languages

Despite the diversity of Aboriginal languages in Canada, three of them (the Cree languages, Inuktitut and Ojibway) accounted for almost two-thirds of the population having an Aboriginal language as mother tongue. The ten most often reported Aboriginal languages accounted for almost 90% of the population having an Aboriginal mother tongue.

Table 1 Population with an Aboriginal mother tongue by language family, main languages within these families and their main provincial and territorial concentrations, Canada, 2011

Aboriginal language families and main languages	Provincial and territorial main concentrations ¹	Population ²
Algonquian languages	Manitoba (24.7%), Quebec (23.0%)	144,015
Cree languages ³	Saskatchewan (28.8%), Manitoba (24.0%), Alberta (21.9%) and Quebec (18.5%)	83,475
Ojibway ³	Ontario (46.3%) and Manitoba (44.3%)	19,275
Innu/Montagnais ³	Quebec (80.9%) and Newfoundland and Labrador (18.7%)	10,965
Oji-Cree ³	Manitoba (69.1%) and Ontario (30.7%)	10,180
Mi'kmaq ³	Nova Scotia (60.2%) and New Brunswick (27.5%)	8,030
Atikamekw ³	Quebec (99.9%)	5,915
Blackfoot ³	Alberta (97.5%)	3,250
Inuit languages	Nunavut (61.6%) and Quebec (31.3%)	35,500
Inuktitut ³	Nunavut (63.1%) and Quebec (32.3%)	34,110
Athapaskan languages	Saskatchewan (40.5%) and Northwest Territories (22.7%)	20,700
Dene ³	Saskatchewan (70.6%) and Alberta (15.2%)	11,860
Tlicho (Dogrib)	Northwest Territories (96.2%)	2,080
Slavey, n.o.s.	Northwest Territories (85.9%)	1,595
Carrier	British Columbia (98.0%)	1,525
Siouan languages	Alberta (76.9%) and Manitoba (16.6%)	4,425
Stoney ³	Alberta (99.5%)	3,155
Dakota	Manitoba (62.5%) and Alberta (21.6%)	1,160

(continued on next page)

Table 1 Population with an Aboriginal mother tongue by language family, main languages within these families and their main provincial and territorial concentrations, Canada, 2011
(continued)

Aboriginal language families and main languages	Provincial and territorial main concentrations ¹	Population ²
Salish languages	British Columbia (98.0%)	2,950
Shuswap (Secwepemctsin)	British Columbia (97.0%)	675
Halkomelem	British Columbia (98.2%)	570
Tsimshian languages	British Columbia (98.1%)	1,815
Gitksan	British Columbia (98.9%)	925
Nisga'a	British Columbia (96.7%)	615
Wakashan languages	British Columbia (95.3%)	1,075
Kwakiutl (Kwak'wala)	British Columbia (98.0%)	495
Nootka (Nuu-chah-nulth)	British Columbia (90.6%)	320
Iroquoian languages	Ontario (82.7%) and Quebec (10.6%)	1,040
Mohawk	Ontario (73.4%) and Quebec (18.3%)	545
Michif	Saskatchewan (40.6%), Manitoba (26.6%) and Alberta (11.7%)	640
Tlingit	Yukon (84.6%) and British Columbia (11.5%)	130
Kutenai	British Columbia (100%)	100
Haida	British Columbia (93.3%)	75
Aboriginal languages, n.i.e.	British Columbia (43.6%) and Ontario (30.2%)	1,010
Total Aboriginal mother-tongue population (single and multiple responses)	Quebec (20.9%), Manitoba (17.7%) and Saskatchewan (16.0%)	213,490

N.o.s. means 'not otherwise specified.'

N.i.e. means 'not included elsewhere.'

Notes:

1. In 2011, there were 31 incompletely enumerated Indian reserves and Indian settlements in the following provinces: Quebec (6), Ontario (20), Manitoba (2), Saskatchewan (1), Alberta (1) and British Columbia (1). The data for these 31 incompletely enumerated Indian reserves and Indian settlements are not included in the 2011 Census of population counts and tabulations.
2. Counts for languages within a family do not add to the total of the language family because only the main languages are shown.
3. One of the ten most reported Aboriginal mother tongues in Canada.

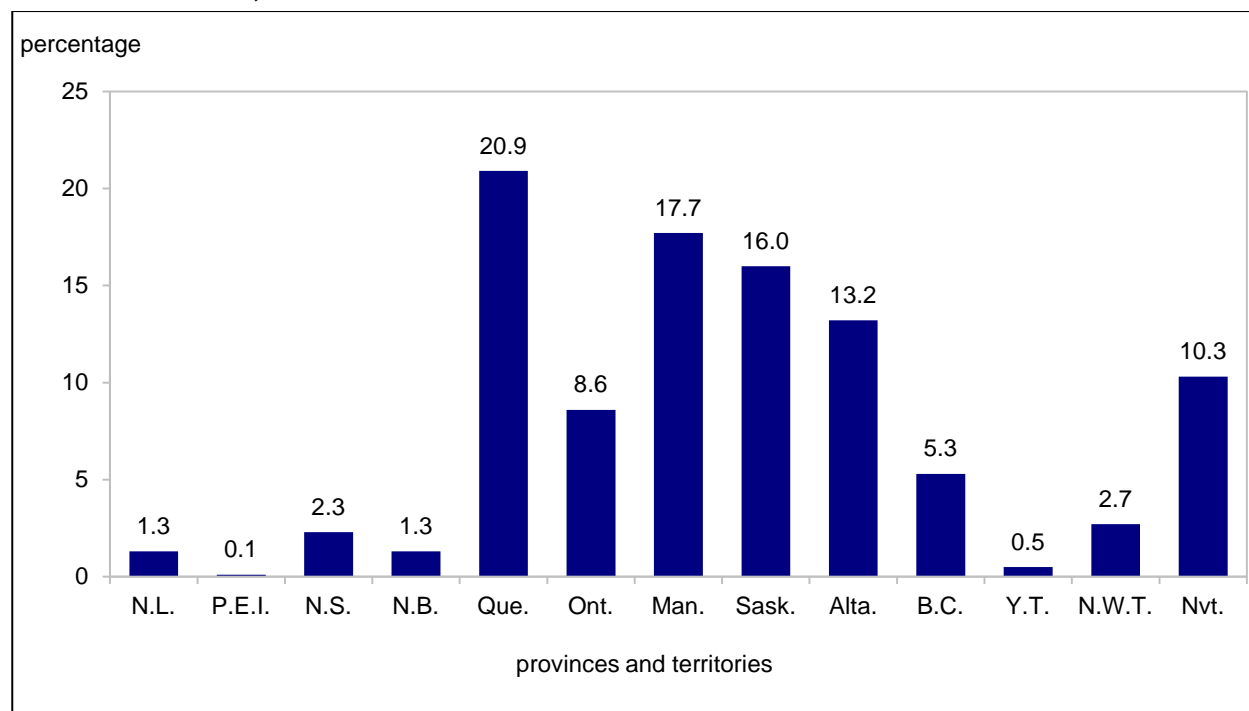
Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2011.

About one in five people reporting an Aboriginal mother tongue live in Quebec

In 2011, of all people reporting an Aboriginal mother tongue in Canada, the highest proportions lived in Quebec (20.9%), Manitoba (17.7%) and Saskatchewan (16.0%) ([Figure 1](#)).

In Quebec, the Aboriginal languages most frequently reported as mother tongues were the Cree languages, Inuktitut, Innu/Montagnais and Atikamekw. The main Aboriginal mother tongues reported in Manitoba were the Cree languages, Ojibway and Oji-Cree. In Saskatchewan, the Cree languages and Dene were the most often reported languages.

Figure 1 Percentage distribution of the Aboriginal mother-tongue population, provinces¹ and territories, 2011



Note:

1. In 2011, there were 31 incompletely enumerated Indian reserves and Indian settlements in the following provinces: Quebec (6), Ontario (20), Manitoba (2), Saskatchewan (1), Alberta (1) and British Columbia (1). The data for these 31 incompletely enumerated Indian reserves and Indian settlements are not included in the 2011 Census of population counts and tabulations.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2011.

Majority of people who reported an Aboriginal mother tongue speak it at home

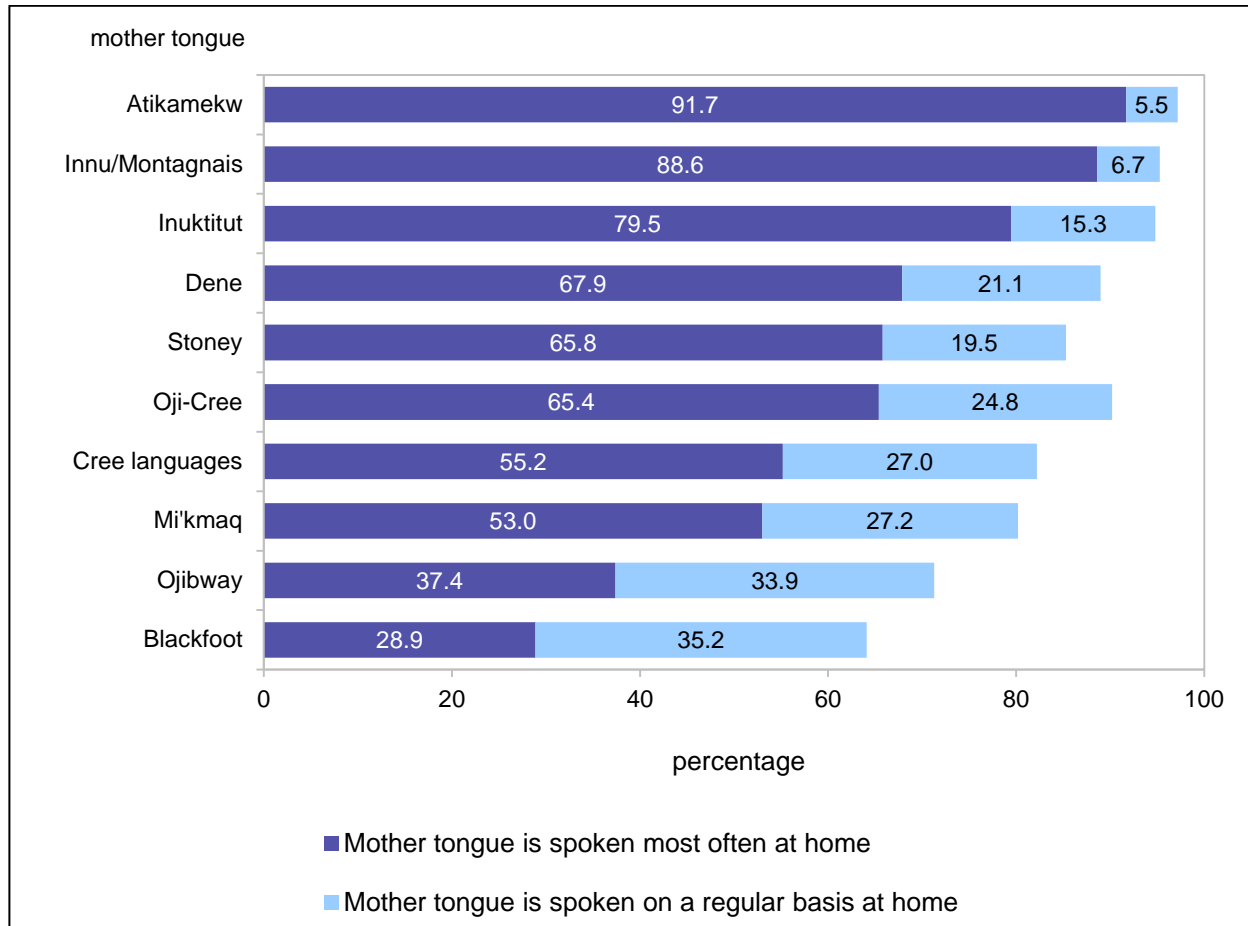
Among the population reporting an Aboriginal mother tongue, 82.2% also reported speaking it at home: 58.1% spoke it most often and 24.1% spoke it on a regular basis, in addition to the language they speak most often.

These proportions differ among the ten most frequently reported Aboriginal mother tongues.

For example, of the roughly 6,000 people who reported Atikamekw as mother tongue, 97.2% spoke it at home (91.7% most often and 5.5% on a regular basis). Similarly, about 95% of the people whose mother tongues were Innu/Montagnais or Inuktitut, and about 90% of those whose mother tongues were Oji-Cree or Dene, spoke them most often or regularly at home ([Figure 2](#)).

Although some people reporting an Aboriginal mother tongue did not report speaking it most often at home, many were still speaking it on a regular basis at home. For example, 28.9% of people whose mother tongue was Blackfoot reported speaking this language most often at home, while another 35.2% reported speaking it on a regular basis, in addition to the language they spoke most often.

Figure 2 Proportion of the population whose mother tongue is one of the ten most reported Aboriginal languages who speak their language most often or on a regular basis at home, Canada, 2011



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2011.

Most other Aboriginal mother tongues not the main home language

Among the 50 or so other Aboriginal languages,⁵ most of them were spoken at home by between 30% and 60% of the people who reported them as mother tongues. They were generally spoken on a regular basis in addition to the main home language (such as English or French); however, some exceptions are noteworthy. For example, 90.2% of the people reporting Naskapi and 54.8% of the people reporting Tlicho (Dogrib) as their mother tongue spoke it most often at home.

5. These roughly 50 other Aboriginal languages were reported by less than 3,000 people each.

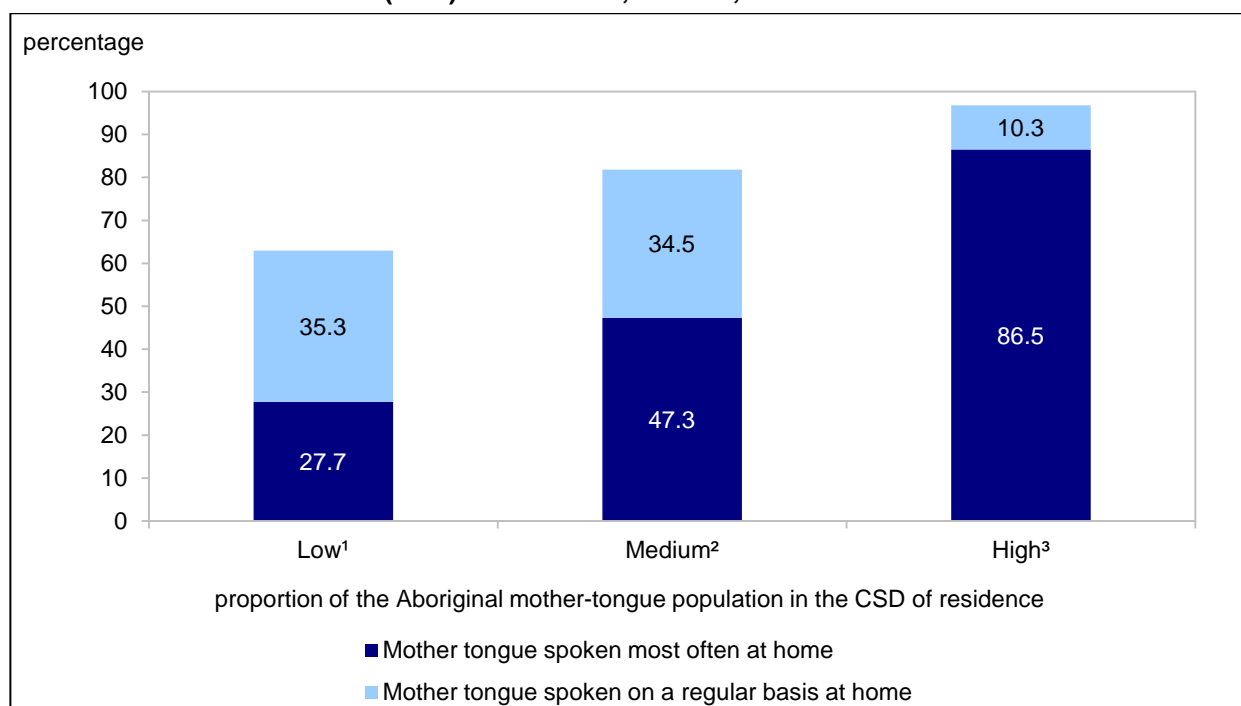
Use of Aboriginal languages at home differs by where people live

In 2011, the proportion of people with an Aboriginal mother tongue who spoke their language at home differed based on where they lived. Specifically, people were more likely to speak their Aboriginal mother tongue at home when living in a census subdivision (CSD)⁶ with a high proportion of the population whose mother tongue was an Aboriginal language.

In CSDs with high proportions of people reporting an Aboriginal mother tongue, most people (96.8%) with an Aboriginal mother tongue spoke that language at home (86.5% most often and 10.3% on a regular basis) (Figure 3).

Conversely, people were less likely to speak their Aboriginal mother tongue at home in CSDs with low proportions of people reporting an Aboriginal mother tongue. In these CSDs, 63.0% of people with an Aboriginal mother tongue reported speaking their language at home (27.7% most often and 35.3% on a regular basis).

Figure 3 Proportion of the population who speak their Aboriginal mother tongue most often or regularly at home, by the proportion of the Aboriginal mother-tongue population in the census subdivision (CSD) of residence, Canada, 2011



Notes:

1. A 'low' proportion of people with an Aboriginal mother tongue includes proportions from 0% to 29%.

2. A 'medium' proportion of people with an Aboriginal mother tongue includes proportions from 30% to 69%.

3. A 'high' proportion of people with an Aboriginal mother tongue includes proportions from 70% to 100%.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2011.

6. Census subdivision (CSD) corresponds to a municipality or an area deemed to be equivalent to a municipality. Indian reserves and Indian settlements are also included in the definition of a census subdivision. For a complete definition please refer to [Box Concepts and definitions](#).

Not all people who speak an Aboriginal language at home have an Aboriginal mother tongue

In 2011, almost 213,400 people reported speaking an Aboriginal language at home. While 82.2% of them reported that same Aboriginal language as their mother tongue, the other 17.8% reported a different language, such as English or French, as mother tongue.

Among the nearly 38,000 people who spoke an Aboriginal language at home and who reported a different language as mother tongue, 23.5% spoke it most often at home while the other 76.5% spoke it on a regular basis, in addition to the main home language.

The Cree languages (38.5%), Ojibway (14.8%), Inuktitut (7.1%), Oji-Cree (3.7%) and Mi'kmaq (3.5%) were the most reported home languages among the roughly 38,000 people who spoke an Aboriginal language at home but who reported a different language as a mother tongue.

Those aged 34 and under were more likely to report speaking an Aboriginal language at home that was different than their mother tongue. More specifically, it was more common among school-aged children (aged 5 to 14), who may have been learning an Aboriginal language as a second language at school.

Box Concepts and definitions

Alternate Aboriginal language names: Some Aboriginal languages are known by or are referred to by more than one name. For example, Tlicho is also known as Dogrib and Nootka as Nuu-chah-nulth. Alternate names come from a variety of sources. These sources may include for example, speakers having more than one name for their language, neighbouring groups may use different names for the language, or names have been assigned by people outside the language group before the name used by the speakers was known.

Census subdivision (CSD): Area that is a municipality or an area that is deemed to be equivalent to a municipality for statistical reporting purposes (e.g., as an Indian reserve or an unorganized territory). Municipal status is defined by laws in effect in each province and territory in Canada.

Home language: Refers to the language spoken most often or on a regular basis (in addition to the language spoken most often) at home by the individual at the time of the census.

Incompletely enumerated Indian reserves and Indian settlements: In 2011, there were a total of 31 Indian reserves and Indian settlements that were 'incompletely enumerated.' For these reserves or settlements, enumeration was either not permitted or was interrupted before it could be completed, or enumeration was not possible because of natural events (specifically forest fires in Northern Ontario). Collection was done at a later time for the 13 Indian reserves and Indian settlements where enumeration was not possible as a result of forest fires in Northern Ontario at the time of census collection. Data for these 31 Indian reserves and Indian settlements are not included in the 2011 Census tabulations. As a result, counts for certain Aboriginal languages may be underestimated.

Mother tongue: Refers to the first language learned at home in childhood and still understood by the individual at the time of the census.

Additional information

Additional information on Aboriginal languages in Canada can be found in the [Highlight tables](#), Catalogue no. 98-314-X2011002, [Topic-based tabulations](#), Catalogue nos. 98-314-X2011016 through 98-314-X2011021, nos. 98-314-X2011030 through 98-314-X2011042 and nos. 98-314-X2011048 through 98-314-X2011050, the [Census Profile](#), Catalogue no. 98-316-X as well as in the new census product [Focus on Geography Series](#), Catalogue no. 98-310-X2011004.

[Thematic maps](#) showing Aboriginal languages in Canada are available for various geographic areas.

Note to readers

Random rounding and percentage distributions: To ensure the confidentiality of responses collected for the 2011 Census while maintaining the quality of the results, a random rounding process is used to alter the values reported in individual cells. As a result, when these data are summed or grouped, the total value may not match the sum of the individual values, since the total and subtotals are independently rounded. Similarly, percentage distributions, which are calculated on rounded data, may not necessarily add up to 100%.

Due to random rounding, counts and percentages may vary slightly between different census products, such as the analytical document, highlight tables, and topic-based tabulations.

Acknowledgments

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