

Catalogue no. 41-20-0002
ISBN 978-0-660-99525-0

The use of Indigenous languages in urban areas in Canada

by Thomas Anderson

Release date: June 18, 2026



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Acknowledgements

This report was prepared by Thomas Anderson from the Centre for Indigenous Statistics and Partnerships at Statistics Canada, with funding provided by the Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages (OCIL). We would like to thank OCIL for their continued work and dedication to the promotion of research on Indigenous languages; without their guidance this report would not have been possible.

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Introduction

In order “to draw global attention on the critical situation of many indigenous languages and to mobilize stakeholders and resources for their preservation, revitalization and promotion,” the United Nations declared 2022-2032 as the [International Decade of Indigenous Languages](#). This work was mirrored in Canada with the passage of the *Indigenous Languages Act* in 2019 and the creation of the Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages.

Past research has pointed to the fact that Indigenous language health tends to be stronger in smaller, geographically isolated areas that are farther away from major cities (Anderson, 2018). However, the Indigenous population living in urban areas has continually grown in recent decades (Statistics Canada, 2022). In light of this reality, this research project will seek to understand the statistical profile of Indigenous language speakers living in urban areas.

The importance of Indigenous languages goes beyond the mere numbers of speakers. Research has examined the central role that Indigenous languages play in the culture and well being of Indigenous Peoples living in urban settings (Norris, 2011) along with their sense of identity and belonging (Morcom, 2021). Analysis of language data, whether in urban or rural environments, needs to account for the specificity of languages—as an increase in the proficiency of the speakers of one language do not benefit the health of another language, simply because they exist under a shared aggregation.

Furthermore, there is a need for data that are specific to the linguistic characteristics of specific cities. Each city in Canada carries its own unique array of Indigenous languages and cultures. As the First Peoples’ Cultural Council has emphasized, the diversity of languages “presents challenges for language revitalization because of limited funding and resources” (First Peoples’ Cultural Council, 2018). In many cities, the situation has been described as lacking a “critical mass of learners” to justify programming for every Indigenous language (National Association of Friendship Centres, 2018). Understanding the profile of urban areas where languages are spoken can help to highlight where there are areas of greatest need and possibilities for revitalization.

Statistics Canada has multiple measures to capture urbanicity. For the purposes of this report, Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) and Census Agglomerations (CAs) were selected as the unit of measure.¹ This was done for two main reasons: 1) area files have been developed for previous census cycles, allowing for comparisons over time, and 2) CMA and CA boundaries generally correspond with agreed upon municipal borders, making statistical findings relevant to Indigenous language service providers working in a given area and allowing for the disaggregation of language data at the level of individual CMAs and CAs.

This report draws on data from the 2021 Census of Population, alongside previous census cycles to identify changes over time in the linguistic profile of Indigenous language speakers living in a CMA or CA. In addition, supplementary statistics using the 2022 Indigenous Peoples Survey, which asks questions on the importance of Indigenous languages, were also included. Finally, twelve CMAs and CAs were selected for focussed analysis, in order to highlight the specific linguistic communities in these areas.

Share of Indigenous language speakers living in CMAs and CAs relatively unchanged in the past 20 years

In 2021, of the 243,155 people living in Canada who could speak an Indigenous language, 57,120 lived in either a Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) or Census Agglomeration (CA). This group made up 23% of all Indigenous language speakers.

Among Indigenous language speakers living in a CMA or CA, the largest group was First Nations people (83%), with Métis (6%) and Inuit (3%) accounting for smaller shares.

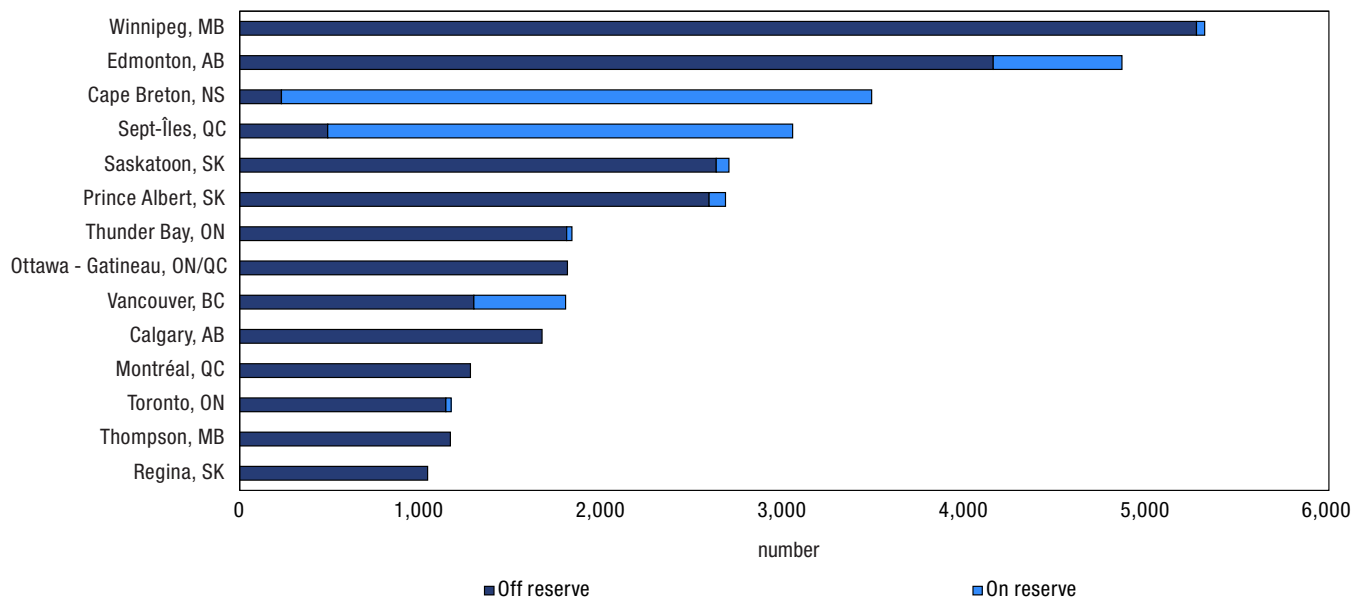
1. See the [Census Dictionary](#) for more information.

Ontario was the province with the largest share of Indigenous language speakers living in a CMA or CA (18%), followed by Alberta (17%) and British Columbia (14%).

Within CMAs and CAs, one fifth (22%) of Indigenous language speakers lived on a First Nations reserve that was within the metropolitan boundaries.² Chart 1 shows the number of Indigenous language speakers living on and off reserve for CMAs or CAs with at least 1,000 people who could speak an Indigenous language.

Chart 1

Number of Indigenous language speakers in selected Census Metropolitan Areas and Census Agglomerations by residence on or off reserve, 2021



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Over a twenty-year period, from 2001 to 2021, the number of Indigenous language speakers living in a CMA or CA rose by 13%. However, the share of Indigenous language speakers who lived in a CMA or CA was relatively unchanged over the same period (23% in 2001 compared with 24% in 2021).

While the share of Indigenous language speakers in CMAs and CAs has changed little from 2001 to 2021, the number of Indigenous people in a CMA or CA has risen dramatically, going up by 121% over that span. This reality begs the question, why do the numbers not reflect higher numbers of Indigenous language speakers living in metropolitan areas?

There are multiple aspects to this, but one part of the change is that it may be due—at least in part—to response mobility. The growth of the Indigenous population living in CMAs and CAs is part of a larger trend of Indigenous population growth as a whole. Response mobility, which refers to respondents changing their answers on survey questions over time, has been found to be a major driver of Indigenous population growth (O'Donnell and LaPointe, 2019). Furthermore, this growth has tended to be highest among Métis and First Nations people without registered or treaty Indian status—two groups with lower shares of people who could speak an Indigenous language.

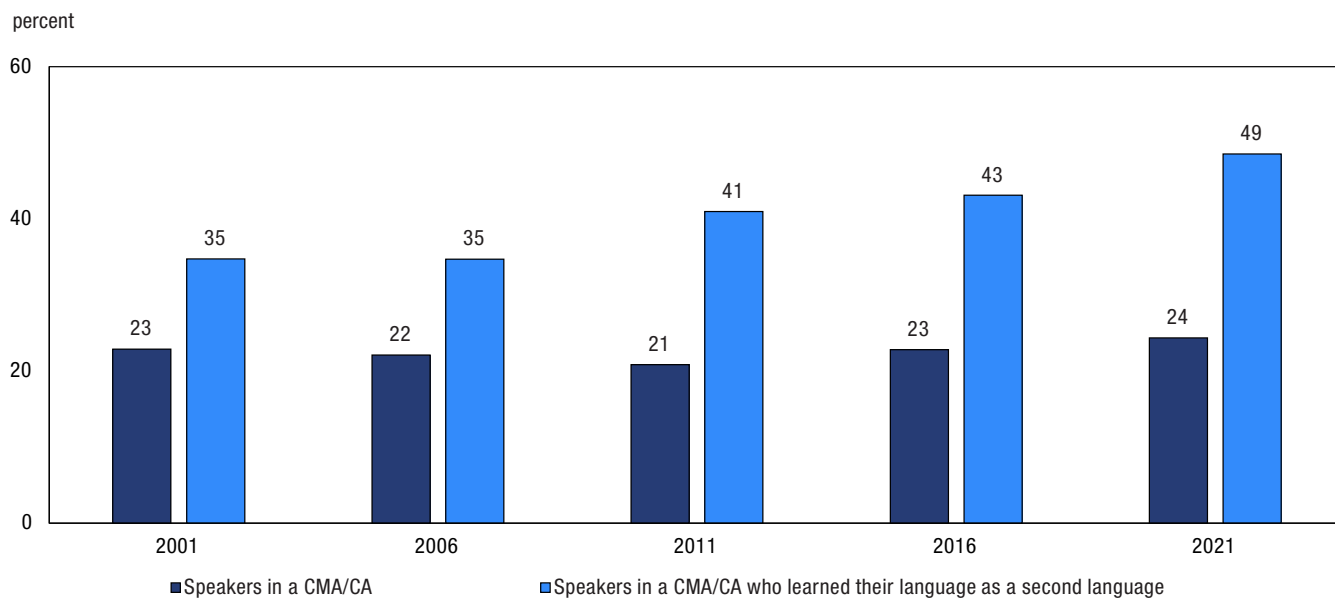
However, beyond the demographic changes arising from response mobility, the more modest growth in the number of Indigenous language speakers in CMAs and CAs could also suggest a difficulty in maintaining language proficiency for Indigenous people who have moved from communities where Indigenous languages are more often spoken into urban areas where speakers are dispersed within a larger population.

2. This figure is lower than it should otherwise be due to incomplete enumeration on some reserves that are within CMA/CA boundaries—for example, Six Nations in Brantford, ON and Tsuu T'ina Nation 145 in Calgary, AB. For more information on incompletely enumerated reserves and settlements, see [Incompletely enumerated reserves and settlements](#).

Chart 2 shows the relative stability in the share of Indigenous language speakers who lived in a CMA or CA, from 2001 to 2021.³ Again, while this share changed little, the proportion of Indigenous language speakers living in a CMA or CA who learned their language as a second language did rise by a significant margin—going from 35% in 2001 to almost half (49%) in 2021.

Chart 2

Proportion of Indigenous language speakers living in a CMA/CA and proportion of speakers in a CMA/CA who learned their language as a second language, Adjusted base, 2001 to 2021



Sources: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2001, 2006, 2016 and 2021, and the National Household Survey, 2011.

Outside of CMAs and CAs, the share of Indigenous language speakers who learned their language as a second language was smaller and changed more modestly, when compared with those living in a CMA and CA. In 2001, less than one in five (17%) of Indigenous language speakers living outside of a CMA or CA had learned their language as a second language. By 2021, this figure had risen to 24%, which was roughly half the share of those living inside a CMA or CA (49%).

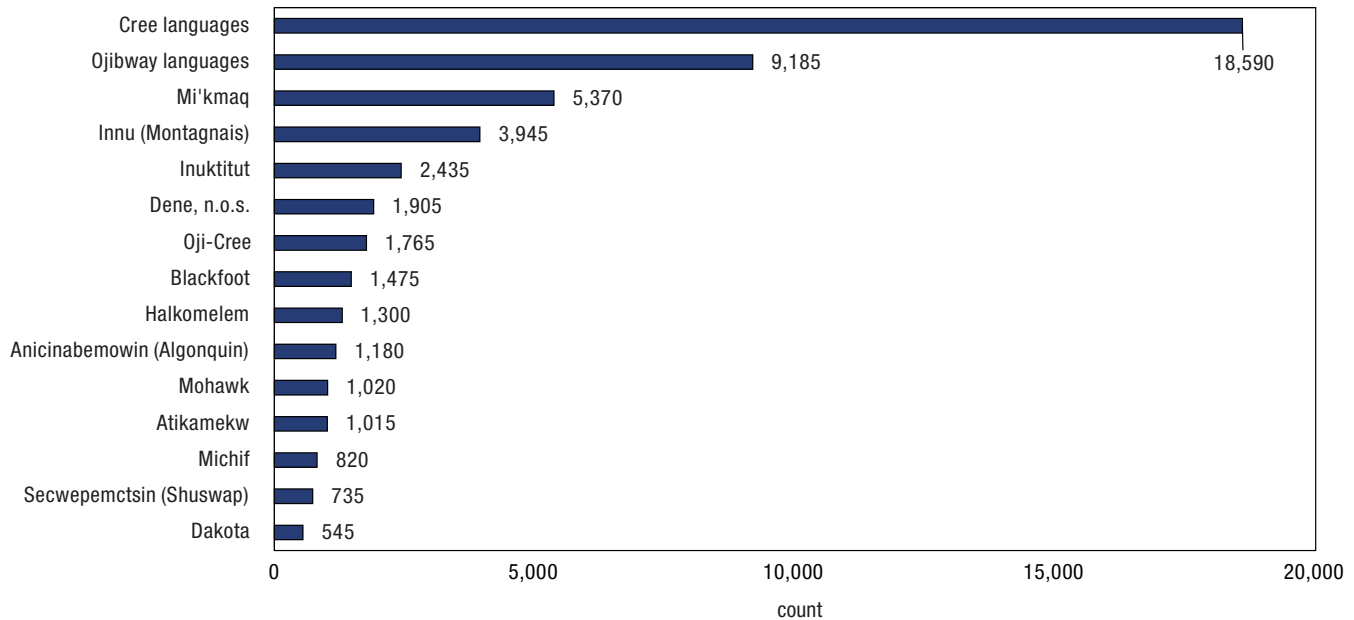
Whether the greater share of second language learners living in CMAs and CAs is generally reflective of Indigenous people learning their languages within urban areas or is driven by second language speakers moving to urban areas is difficult to say. However, these results could highlight the need for more focussed analysis on second language programs in Canadian cities and their outcomes.

Cree languages and Ojibway languages most commonly spoken in CMAs and CAs

Beyond the general trends of all Indigenous languages, it is important to consider the specific languages spoken in CMAs and CAs. Chart 3 shows the most commonly spoken Indigenous languages in CMAs and CAs.

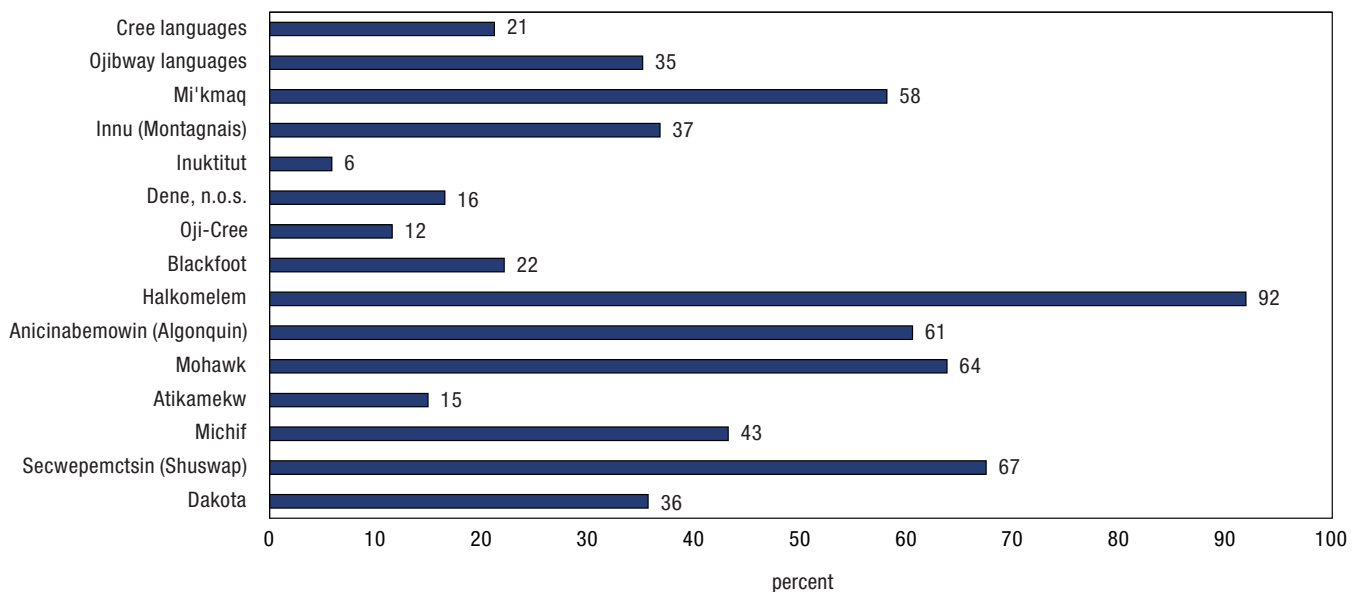
Cree languages was the largest group among Indigenous language speakers living in CMAs and CAs, with 18,590 speakers, followed by Ojibway languages (9,185 speakers) and Mi'kmaq (5,370 speakers).

3. The figures in this chart were adjusted to account for incompletely enumerated reserves.

Chart 3**Most commonly spoken Indigenous languages in Census Metropolitan Areas and Census Agglomerations, 2021**

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

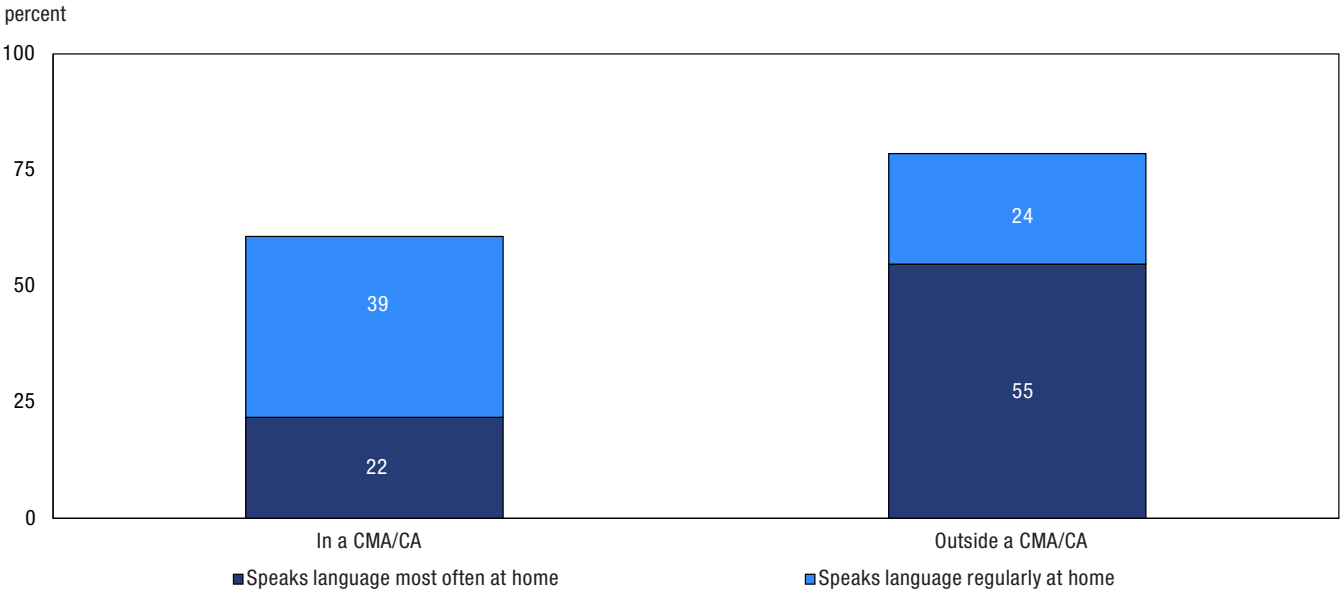
Among those languages with the highest numbers of speakers living in a CMA or CA, the degree of urbanicity varied. For languages like Halkomelem (92%) and Secwepemctsin (Shuswap) (67%), the majority of speakers lived in a CMA or CA. However, for other languages, such as Inuktitut (6%), only a small minority of speakers lived in a CMA or CA (Chart 4).

Chart 4**Proportion of Indigenous language speakers who lived in a Census Metropolitan Area or Census Agglomeration, for the most commonly spoken Indigenous languages in Census Metropolitan Areas and Census Agglomerations, 2021**

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

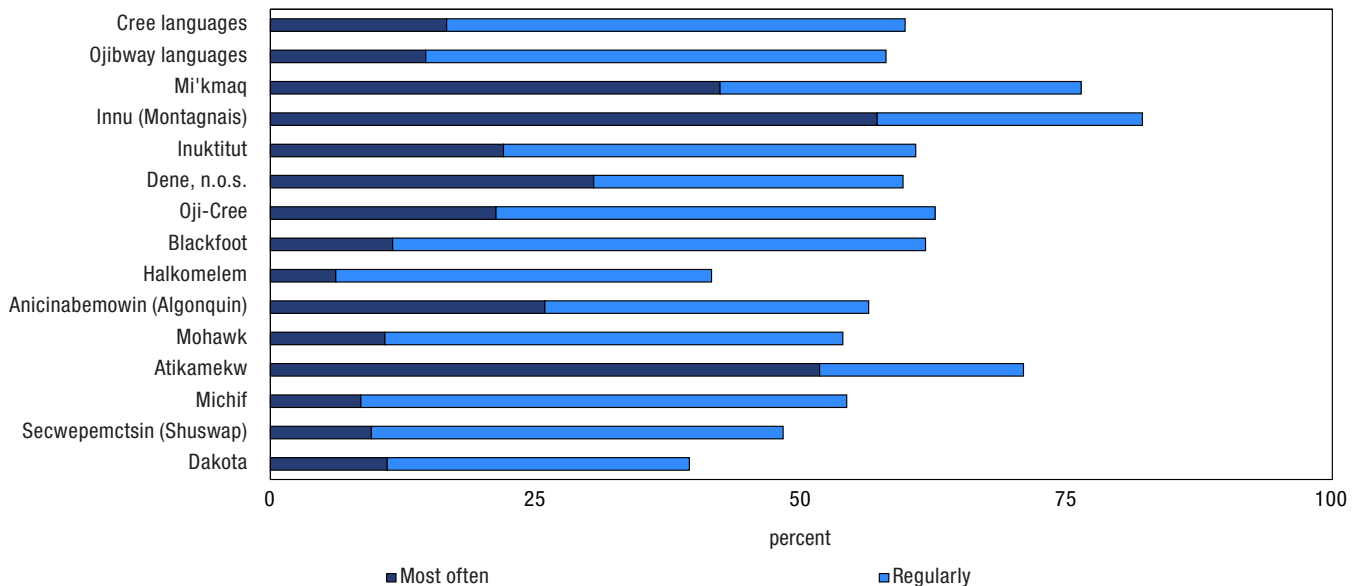
Within CMAs and CAs, Indigenous language speakers were less likely to speak their language at home than those who lived outside of CMAs and CAs (Chart 5). Just over one in five of Indigenous language speakers who lived in a CMA or CA spoke their language most often at home (22%), while another 39% spoke it regularly. The figures for Indigenous language speakers living outside of CMAs and CAs were 55% (most often) and 24% (regularly).

Chart 5
Home use of Indigenous languages by Indigenous language speakers in Census Metropolitan Areas and Census Agglomerations, 2021



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Among the most commonly spoken Indigenous languages in CMAs and CAs, the share who spoke their language at home varied. For example, more than half of speakers of Innu (Montagnais) and Atikamekw who lived in a CMA or CA spoke their language at home most often (57% and 52% respectively). Other languages, such as Halkomelem and Dakota, had lower proportions of home use (see chart 6, below).

Chart 6**Home use of Indigenous language, for the most commonly spoken Indigenous languages in Census Metropolitan Areas and Census Agglomerations, 2021**

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

In 2021, there were 35,015 people with an Indigenous mother tongue living in a CMA or CA. While most of this group were still able to converse in their mother tongue, 5,570 people were considered silent speakers—meaning that while they still understood their mother tongue, they could no longer speak it well enough to conduct a conversation. The share of those with an Indigenous mother tongue who were silent speakers was 16% for those living in a CMA or CA, which was significantly higher than the share outside of CMAs or CAs (6%).

Indigenous language speakers inside and outside CMAs and CAs consider their languages important

The Indigenous Peoples Survey (IPS) also has significant content that can be used to analyse the linguistic profile of Indigenous people living in CMAs and CAs. However, it is important to keep several things in mind when comparing data between the IPS and the Census. First, the IPS has a much broader definition of an Indigenous language speaker—asking respondents if they could understand or speak an Indigenous language “even if only a few words.”⁴ Another important distinction is that the IPS sample did not include First Nations people living on reserve. Therefore, any Indigenous language speakers living on reserve within the boundaries of a CMA or CA are absent from the IPS analysis.

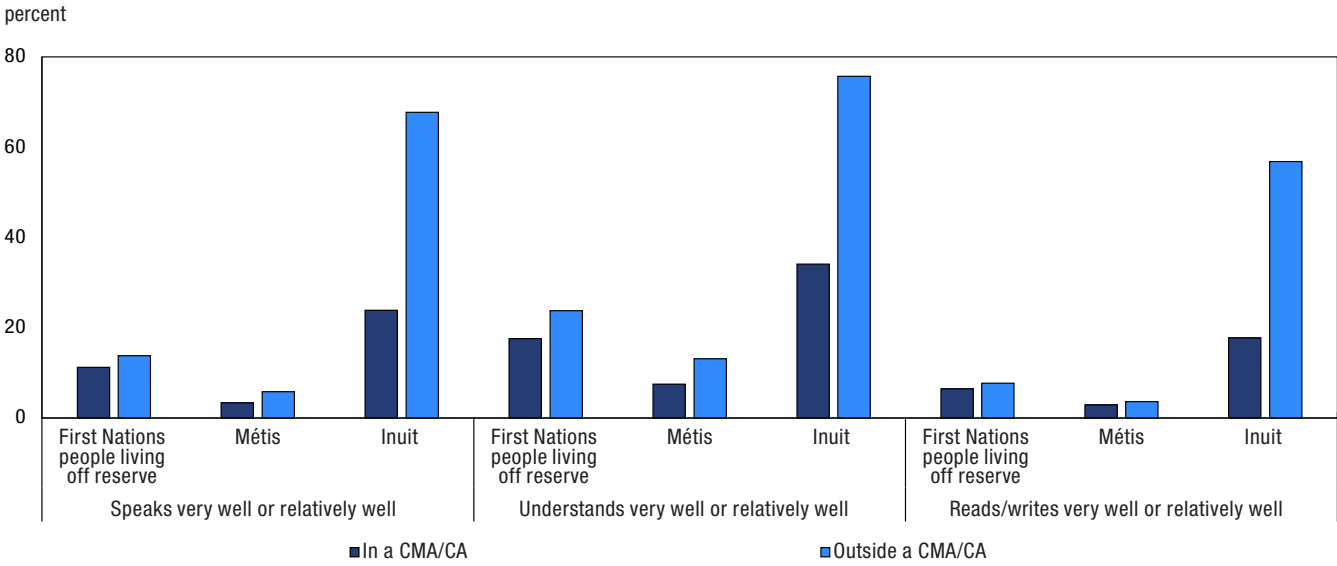
Data from the 2022 Indigenous Peoples Survey show that, among Indigenous language speakers,⁵ the majority of Indigenous people reported that being able to speak an Indigenous language was either very important or somewhat important (78%). There was little difference between the responses of speakers living in a CMA or CA and those living outside (77% and 79%, respectively). This pattern held true for each Indigenous group—First Nations people living off reserve, Métis and Inuit.

Self-rated language proficiency varied depending upon whether the speaker lived inside or outside a CMA or CA. When asked to assess their own ability to speak an Indigenous language, 9% of Indigenous people living in a CMA or CA stated that they could speak their Indigenous language very well or relatively well, compared with 26% of those living outside of a CMA or CA. The differences were most pronounced among Inuit, as Chart 7 shows.

4. By contrast, the census variable, Knowledge of an Indigenous Language, is based on the concept of being able to speak an Indigenous language well enough to conduct a conversation.

5. This group also includes parents of speakers who were six years of age and older.

Chart 7
Proportion of Indigenous language speakers who reported speaking, understanding and reading or writing their language very well or relatively well by Indigenous identity and residence in a Census Metropolitan Area or Census Agglomeration, 2022



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

In past research, Indigenous people have been found to place more importance on Indigenous languages when they are exposed both inside and outside the home (Jewell, 2016). Among parents of Indigenous children who were in school and were aged 6 to 18 years, one quarter (25%) reported that their child had been taught an Indigenous language in school. This was less common among those living in a CMA or CA (21%) than among those who lived outside of a CMA or CA (35%). This divide was most pronounced among Inuit (16% versus 84%).

Language characteristics of selected CMAs and CAs

The following cities were selected for focused analysis, due to having at least 1,000 people who reported the ability to speak an Indigenous language.⁶

6. Beyond the CMAs and CAs presented here, two other census agglomerations—Cape Breton, NS and Sept-Îles, QC—met the criteria for inclusion based on having a high number of speakers within the CA boundary. However, in both cases, the vast majority of speakers lived on reserve. Indigenous language speakers in these CAs generally spoke a single Indigenous language. In Cape Breton, the primary Indigenous language was Mi'kmaq (99.6% of speakers) and in Sept-Îles it was Innu (Montagnais) (97.0% of speakers).

Winnipeg, MB

Winnipeg is home to the largest number of Indigenous people and Indigenous language speakers among all CMAs and CAs in Canada. In 2021, 5,315 people in Winnipeg could speak an Indigenous language well enough to conduct a conversation. Almost nine-in-ten (89%) speakers were First Nations people, 6% were Métis and 2% were Inuit.

Table 1
Language characteristics for selected Indigenous languages in Winnipeg, Manitoba, 2021

	Ability to speak	Learned language as				Silent speakers	Average age of mother tongue population	Speaks language at home	
		mother tongue	percent	second language	percent			Most often	Regularly
	number	number	percent	number	percent	number		number	
Ojibway languages	2,325	1,415	61	910	39	335	48	435	930
Anishinaabemowin (Chippewa)	170	80	47	85	50	15	46	15	80
Daawaamwin (Odawa)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Saulteau (Western Ojibway)	375	260	69	110	29	65	57	30	160
Ojibway, n.o.s.	1,810	1,105	61	705	39	260	46	385	700
Cree languages	1,805	1,070	59	735	41	205	48	280	930
Ililimowin (Moose Cree)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Inu Ayimun (Southern East Cree)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Iyiyiw-Ayimiwin (Northern East Cree)	40	35	88	10	25	10	45	0	35
Nehinawewin (Swampy Cree)	630	385	61	245	39	85	50	55	405
Nehiyawewin (Plains Cree)	115	50	43	65	57	10	49	10	60
Nihithawiwin (Woods Cree)	70	30	43	40	57	10	62	0	35
Cree, n.o.s.	965	580	60	380	39	85	46	205	400
Oji-Cree	990	615	62	375	38	65	39	225	410
Inuktitut	115	75	65	40	35	20	32	40	35
Michif	95	35	37	55	58	45	58	10	35

... not applicable

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

The largest Indigenous language group in Winnipeg was Ojibway languages, with 2,325 speakers. Most of this group was made up by those who reported Ojibway, n.o.s.⁷ (78%), followed by Saulteau (Western Ojibway) (16%) and Anishinaabemowin (Chippewa) (7%). There were an additional 335 people in Winnipeg, who were silent speakers of an Ojibway language.

Cree language speakers were the next largest group in Winnipeg (1,805 speakers), with an additional 205 people who were silent speakers of a Cree language. The largest share of Cree language speakers reported Cree, n.o.s. (53%), followed by Nehinawewin (Swampy Cree) (35%).

Oji-Cree was the third largest group in Winnipeg, with 990 speakers, and an additional 65 people who were silent speakers.

7. n.o.s. = not otherwise specified.

Edmonton, AB

Just under five thousand people could speak an Indigenous language in Edmonton (4,860). Three quarters of speakers were First Nations people (77%), 13% were Métis and 1% were Inuit. Within the boundaries of the CMA of Edmonton, 15% of Indigenous language speakers lived on reserve, within the communities of Enoch Cree Nation, Alexander 134, Wabamun 133A and Wabamun 133B; for the most part; the Indigenous languages spoken in these communities were Cree and Stoney.

Within Edmonton as a whole, Cree languages represented the largest group (3,895 speakers). The majority of this group either reported Cree, n.o.s. (53%) or Nehiyawewin (Plains Cree) (36%). An additional 450 people were silent speakers of a Cree language.

The next most spoken Indigenous languages in Edmonton were Stoney (260 speakers and 20 silent speakers), Dene, n.o.s. (175 speakers and 40 silent speakers), Ojibway languages (135 speakers and 20 silent speakers) and Michif (95 speakers and 25 silent speakers).

Table 2
Language characteristics for selected Indigenous languages in Edmonton, Alberta, 2021

	Ability to speak	Learned language as				Silent speakers	Average age of mother tongue population	Speaks language at home	
		mother tongue		second language				Most often	Regularly
		number	percent	number	percent				
Cree languages	3,895	1,785	46	2,110	54	450	48	600	1,660
Ililimowin (Moose Cree)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Inu Ayimun (Southern East Cree)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Iyiyiw-Ayimiwin (Northern East Cree)	40	30	75	10	25	10	64	0	15
Nehinawewin (Swampy Cree)	65	30	46	30	46	10	58	0	10
Nehiyawewin (Plains Cree)	1,385	520	38	865	62	145	49	145	720
Nihithawiwin (Woods Cree)	375	230	61	145	39	65	51	80	160
Cree, n.o.s.	2,080	1,005	48	1,080	52	215	46	365	770
Stoney	260	115	44	145	56	20	47	50	60
Dene, n.o.s.	175	105	60	65	37	40	59	50	50
Ojibway languages	135	65	48	70	52	20	49	10	85
Anishinaabemowin (Chippewa)	30	10	33	25	83	0	x	0	15
Daawaamwin (Odawa)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Saulteau (Western Ojibway)	35	30	86	10	29	0	46	0	25
Ojibway, n.o.s.	65	30	46	40	62	20	47	0	50
Michif	95	50	53	40	42	25	59	20	40

... not applicable

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Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Saskatoon, SK

In 2021, there were 2,690 people living in Saskatoon who could speak an Indigenous language well enough to conduct a conversation. Four in five speakers were First Nations people (81%) and 14% were Métis.

Cree languages were the most commonly spoken Indigenous languages in Saskatoon, accounting for 74% of all Indigenous languages speakers in the CMA (1,995 speakers). The largest shares of Cree speakers were those who reported Cree, n.o.s (45%) and those who reported Nehiyawewin (Plains Cree) (43%). There were an additional 185 people who were silent speakers of a Cree language.

There were 370 people who spoke Dene, n.o.s., along with an additional 35 silent speakers of Dene, n.o.s.. The next most commonly spoken Indigenous languages in Saskatoon were Ojibway languages (210 speakers and 20 silent speakers), Michif (115 speakers and 20 silent speakers) and Dakota (80 speakers and 10 silent speakers).

Table 3
Language characteristics for selected Indigenous languages in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, 2021

	Ability to speak	Learned language as				Silent speakers	Average age of mother tongue population	Speaks language at home	
		mother tongue		second language				Most often	Regularly
		number	number	percent	number				
Cree languages	1,995	905	45	1,090	55	185	49	250	885
Ililimowin (Moose Cree)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Inu Ayimun (Southern East Cree)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Iyiyiw-Ayimiwin (Northern East Cree)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Nehinawewin (Swampy Cree)	60	45	75	15	25	15	54	10	30
Nehiyawewin (Plains Cree)	865	300	35	570	66	75	50	85	525
Nihithawiwin (Woods Cree)	190	95	50	95	50	10	52	0	100
Cree, n.o.s.	900	495	55	405	45	80	47	135	235
Dene, n.o.s.	370	235	64	135	36	35	41	120	110
Ojibway languages	210	130	62	85	40	20	44	40	90
Anishinaabemowin (Chippewa)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Daawaamwin (Odawa)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Saulteau (Western Ojibway)	170	100	59	70	41	10	42	20	90
Ojibway, n.o.s.	45	35	78	15	33	0	48	25	0
Michif	115	60	52	50	43	20	72	0	65
Dakota	80	45	56	35	44	10	53	0	40

... not applicable

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Prince Albert, SK

There were 2,675 Indigenous language speakers living in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan in 2021. Just over one in twenty people who lived in Prince Albert could speak an Indigenous language (6%). Most Indigenous language speakers in Prince Albert were First Nations people (88%), while another 8% were Métis.

Most people who spoke an Indigenous language in Prince Albert, spoke a Cree language (80%), with 2,135 speakers altogether. Just over half of Cree language speakers reported Cree, n.o.s. (53%). The next largest groups were Nihithawiwin (Woods Cree) (22%) and Nehiyawewin (Plains Cree) (16%). There were an additional 100 people who were silent speakers of a Cree language.

The next largest Indigenous language speaker groups in Prince Albert were Dene, n.o.s. (450 speakers and 50 silent speakers) and Dakota (70 speakers and 10 silent speakers).

Table 4
Language characteristics for selected Indigenous languages in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, 2021

	Ability to speak number	Learned language as				Silent speakers number	Average age of mother tongue population	Speaks language at home	
		mother tongue number	percent	second language number	percent			Most often number	Regularly number
Cree languages	2,135	1,305	61	830	39	100	44	500	1,025
Ililimowin (Moose Cree)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Inu Ayimun (Southern East Cree)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Iyiyiw-Ayimiwin (Northern East Cree)	50	10	20	35	70	0	58	0	15
Nehinawewin (Swampy Cree)	180	110	61	70	39	0	52	35	115
Nehiyawewin (Plains Cree)	340	130	38	205	60	15	51	25	175
Nihithawiwin (Woods Cree)	460	300	65	155	34	15	43	100	270
Cree, n.o.s.	1,130	765	68	365	32	55	41	345	440
Dene, n.o.s.	450	300	67	145	32	50	30	180	140
Dakota	70	25	36	45	64	10	42	10	15

... not applicable

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Thunder Bay, ON

In 2021, there were 1,835 people in Thunder Bay who could speak an Indigenous language well enough to conduct a conversation. In Thunder Bay, almost all Indigenous language speakers were First Nations people (96%).

Ojibway languages (1,195 speakers) made up the largest share of speakers in Thunder Bay (65%). There were an additional 110 silent speakers of Ojibway languages. The vast majority of Ojibway language speakers simply reported Ojibway, n.o.s. (96%).

The next largest groups of Indigenous language speakers in Thunder Bay were those who spoke Oji-Cree (535 speakers and 55 silent speakers) and Cree languages (135 speakers and 35 silent speakers).

Table 5
Language characteristics for selected Indigenous languages in Thunder Bay, Ontario, 2021

	Ability to speak	Learned language as				Silent speakers	Average age of mother tongue population	Speaks language at home	
		mother tongue		second language				Most often	Regularly
		number	number	percent	number			percent	number
Ojibway languages	1,195	610	51	580	49	110	51	215	495
Anishinaabemowin (Chippewa)	50	15	30	35	70	0	56	10	35
Daawaamwin (Odawa)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Saulteau (Western Ojibway)	10	10	100	0	0	0	60	0	10
Ojibway, n.o.s.	1,145	595	52	550	48	110	50	215	465
Oji-Cree	535	360	67	180	34	55	46	125	215
Cree languages	135	105	78	35	26	35	50	10	55
Ililimowin (Moose Cree)	10	0	0	0	0	0	x	0	10
Inu Ayimun (Southern East Cree)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Iyiyiw-Ayimiwin (Northern East Cree)	0	0	0	0	0	0	x	0	10
Nehinawewin (Swampy Cree)	65	45	69	25	38	10	49	10	30
Nehiyawewin (Plains Cree)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Nihithawiwin (Woods Cree)	10	10	100	0	0	0	x	0	0
Cree, n.o.s	50	45	90	0	0	15	48	0	15

... not applicable

x suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the *Statistics Act*

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Ottawa – Gatineau, ON/QC

In Ottawa – Gatineau, 1,805 people could speak an Indigenous language well enough to conduct a conversation. Roughly half of speakers were First Nations people (49%), 3% were Métis and 34% were Inuit.

Owing to the fact that it has the largest Inuit population of any CMA or CA in Canada, Inuktitut (735 speakers) was the largest Indigenous language group in Ottawa – Gatineau. There were an additional 55 people who were silent speakers of Inuktitut.

Cree languages represented the next largest group with 415 speakers and 55 silent speakers. The most commonly spoken Cree language in Ottawa – Gatineau was Iyiyiw-Ayimiwin (Northern East Cree), with 150 speakers. Ojibway languages was the third largest group (265 speakers), followed by Anicinabemowin (Algonquin) (95 speakers) and Mohawk (70 speakers and 10 silent speakers).

Table 6
Language characteristics for selected Indigenous languages in Ottawa – Gatineau, Ontario/Québec, 2021

	Ability to speak	Learned language as				Silent speakers	Average age of mother tongue population	Speaks language at home	
		mother tongue		second language				Most often	Regularly
		number	number	percent	number			percent	number
Inuktitut	735	495	67	240	33	55	36	145	395
Cree languages	415	245	59	175	42	55	42	130	140
Iilimowin (Moose Cree)	20	0	0	20	100	0	...	0	0
Inu Ayimun (Southern East Cree)	10	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Iyiyiw-Ayimiwin (Northern East Cree)	150	90	60	60	40	0	31	55	40
Nehinawewin (Swampy Cree)	90	55	61	30	33	0	44	10	55
Nehiyawewin (Plains Cree)	35	10	29	20	57	15	62	0	0
Nihithawiwin (Woods Cree)	10	0	0	10	100	0	...	0	0
Cree, n.o.s.	105	75	71	30	29	30	44	60	25
Ojibway languages	265	85	32	175	66	0	44	15	130
Anishinaabemowin (Chippewa)	95	35	37	60	63	0	25	10	65
Daawaamwin (Odawa)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Saulteau (Western Ojibway)	15	0	0	10	67	0	...	0	0
Ojibway, n.o.s.	160	50	31	110	69	0	55	10	65
Anicinabemowin (Algonquin)	95	60	63	35	37	0	28	0	65
Mohawk	70	10	14	65	93	10	60	0	35

... not applicable

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Vancouver, BC

In Vancouver, 1,800 people were speakers of an Indigenous language. Most speakers were First Nations people (79%), with smaller shares of Métis (6%) and Inuit (2%).

Vancouver had a diverse range of Indigenous languages, with no single language having as many as four hundred speakers. Cree languages were the largest group with 335 speakers and 90 silent speakers. Most Cree speakers in Vancouver either reported Cree, n.o.s. (43%) or Nehiyawewin (Plains Cree) (42%).

The next most commonly spoken Indigenous language in Vancouver was Squamish (290 speakers and 10 silent speakers), followed by Halkomelem (250 speakers) and Ojibway languages (125 speakers and 10 silent speakers).

Table 7

Language characteristics for selected Indigenous languages in Vancouver, British Columbia, 2021

	Ability to speak	Learned language as				Silent speakers	Average age of mother tongue population	Speaks language at home	
		mother tongue		second language				Most often	Regularly
		number	percent	number	percent			number	
Cree languages	335	155	46	185	55	90	54	30	140
Ililimowin (Moose Cree)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Inu Ayimun (Southern East Cree)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Iyiyiw-Ayimiwin (Northern East Cree)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Nehinawewin (Swampy Cree)	45	15	33	30	67	20	44	0	15
Nehiyawewin (Plains Cree)	140	75	54	60	43	30	56	25	65
Nihithawiwin (Woods Cree)	30	0	0	30	100	10	68	10	20
Cree, n.o.s.	145	60	41	85	59	20	51	10	45
Squamish	290	25	9	260	90	10	44	10	90
Halkomelem	250	30	12	215	86	0	54	20	15
Ojibway languages	125	50	40	75	60	10	52	0	30
Anishinaabemowin (Chippewa)	35	0	0	35	100	0	...	0	15
Daawaamwin (Odawa)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Saulteau (Western Ojibway)	25	15	60	10	40	0	38	0	0
Ojibway, n.o.s.	60	40	67	25	42	10	58	0	10
Nisga'a	60	30	50	30	50	15	58	0	25
Indigenous languages, n.i.e.	60	20	33	45	75	10	39	0	0
Inuktitut	55	25	45	30	55	0	36	0	35
Mohawk	50	0	0	40	80	0	x	0	35
Michif	50	10	20	40	80	0	68	0	15

... not applicable

x suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the *Statistics Act*

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Calgary, AB

In 2021, there were 1,660 Indigenous language speakers living in Calgary. Just over four-fifths (82%) of speakers were First Nations people, along with 7% for Métis and 2% for Inuit.

The largest Indigenous language group were Cree languages with 545 speakers and 95 silent speakers. Nehiyawewin (Plains Cree) speakers made up 44% of all Cree speakers in Calgary and those who reported Cree, n.o.s. made up 43%.

Blackfoot was the next largest language group with 465 speakers and 45 silent speakers, followed by Stoney, with 180 speakers.

Census data shows that 170 people spoke Tsuu T'ina (Sarsi), in 2021. However, given that Tsuu T'ina Nation 145 was not enumerated in 2021, this number represents an undercounting of the real number of speakers.

Table 8
Language characteristics for selected Indigenous languages in Calgary, Alberta, 2021

	Ability to speak	Learned language as				Silent speakers	Average age of mother tongue population	Speaks language at home	
		mother tongue		second language				Most often	Regularly
		number	number	percent	number			percent	number
Cree languages	545	170	31	375	69	95	46	10	300
Ilimowin (Moose Cree)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Inu Ayimun (Southern East Cree)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Iyiyiw-Ayimiwin (Northern East Cree)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Nehinawewin (Swampy Cree)	30	20	67	0	0	10	60	0	25
Nehiyawewin (Plains Cree)	240	55	23	180	75	15	48	0	115
Nihithawiwin (Woods Cree)	40	15	38	20	50	10	38	0	30
Cree, n.o.s.	235	70	30	165	70	65	42	0	125
Blackfoot	465	240	52	225	48	45	51	100	235
Stoney	180	110	61	70	39	0	38	40	70
Tsuu T'ina (Sarsi)	170	90	53	80	47	0	18	0	155
Ojibway languages	125	55	44	70	56	10	57	15	35
Anishinaabemowin (Chippewa)	15	0	0	15	100	0	...	0	0
Daawaamwin (Odawa)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Saulteau (Western Ojibway)	55	30	55	25	45	10	57	15	10
Ojibway, n.o.s	55	25	45	30	55	0	56	0	25

... not applicable

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Montréal, QC

In Montréal, there were 1,270 people who could speak an Indigenous language, in 2021. Just over four-in-ten Indigenous language speakers were First Nations people (43%), while 3% were Métis and 28% were Inuit.

Inuktitut was the most commonly spoken Indigenous language in Montreal, with 465 speakers and an additional 35 silent speakers. The next largest group was those who spoke a Cree language (250 speakers and 35 silent speakers); and the most common responses for those in the Cree language group were Iyiyiw-Ayimiwin (Northern East Cree) (46%) and Cree, n.o.s. (40%).

Mohawk was reported by 120 speakers. However, the First Nations of Kahnawake and Kanesatake, which belong to the Mohawk Nation and fall within the boundaries of Montréal, were not enumerated in 2021. As a result, the figures for Mohawk in Montréal are most likely undercounted.

Table 9
Language characteristics for selected Indigenous languages in Montréal, Quebec, 2021

	Ability to speak	Learned language as				Silent speakers	Average age of mother tongue population	Speaks language at home	
		mother tongue		second language				Most often	Regularly
		number	percent	number	percent			number	
Inuktitut	465	300	65	160	34	35	34	160	125
Cree languages	250	125	50	125	50	35	37	90	70
Iilimowin (Moose Cree)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Inu Ayimun (Southern East Cree)	10	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Iyiyiw-Ayimiwin (Northern East Cree)	115	70	61	45	39	10	38	45	25
Nehinawewin (Swampy Cree)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Nehiyawewin (Plains Cree)	20	0	0	15	75	0	...	0	10
Nihithawiwini (Woods Cree)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Cree, n.o.s.	100	40	40	65	65	25	34	25	35
Innu (Montagnais)	125	50	40	80	64	10	52	0	50
Mohawk	120	40	33	85	71	0	57	0	55
Ojibway languages	80	15	19	65	81	0	52	20	15
Anishinaabemowin (Chippewa)	55	15	27	45	82	0	x	20	10
Daawaamwin (Odawa)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Saulteau (Western Ojibway)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Ojibway, n.o.s.	25	0	0	15	60	0	...	0	0
Anicinabemowin (Algonquin)	55	35	64	20	36	0	50	0	0

... not applicable

x suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the *Statistics Act*

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Toronto, ON

As the largest CMA in Canada, Toronto was home to 1,160 Indigenous language speakers, in 2021. Two-thirds of speakers were First Nations people (67%), with smaller shares of Métis (7%) and Inuit (3%).

The largest Indigenous language group was Ojibway languages, with 600 speakers and an additional 60 silent speakers. The majority of Ojibway speakers simply reported Ojibway, n.o.s. (79%) and 21% reported Anishinaabemowin (Chippewa).

The next largest group was Cree languages (220 speakers and 20 silent speakers), followed by Mi'kmaq (90 speakers and 10 silent speakers) and Mohawk (65 speakers).

Table 10
Language characteristics for selected Indigenous languages in Toronto, Ontario, 2021

	Ability to speak	Learned language as				Silent speakers	Average age of mother tongue population	Speaks language at home	
		mother tongue		second language				Most often	Regularly
		number	number	percent	number			percent	number
Ojibway languages	600	260	43	340	57	60	44	90	265
Anishinaabemowin (Chippewa)	125	40	32	85	68	15	49	10	80
Daawaamwin (Odawa)	10	0	0	0	0	0	x	0	10
Saulteau (Western Ojibway)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Ojibway, n.o.s.	475	220	46	260	55	50	43	85	175
Cree languages	220	110	50	110	50	20	49	30	115
Ililimowin (Moose Cree)	10	0	0	0	0	0	x	0	0
Inu Ayimun (Southern East Cree)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Iyiyiw-Ayimiwin (Northern East Cree)	15	15	100	0	0	0	...	0	0
Nehinawewin (Swampy Cree)	50	45	90	0	0	0	43	10	35
Nehiyawewin (Plains Cree)	25	10	40	20	80	0	60	0	20
Nihithawiwin (Woods Cree)	10	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Cree, n.o.s.	105	30	29	75	71	10	50	0	40
Mi'kmaq	90	10	11	80	89	10	40	0	75
Mohawk	65	25	38	40	62	0	40	0	45
Inuktitut	55	20	36	35	64	0	54	0	20

... not applicable

x suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the *Statistics Act*

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Thompson, MB

In 2021, there were 1,160 people in Thompson who could speak an Indigenous language well enough to conduct a conversation. The vast majority of this group were First Nations people (92%).

Almost one-in-ten (9%) of the total population of Thompson could speak an Indigenous language. This was the highest figure of all CMAs and CAs with the exception of Sept-Îles, where most speakers lived on reserve.

Cree languages were the most commonly spoken Indigenous languages in Thompson, by a wide margin. There were 1,015 speakers of a Cree language, in 2021, with an additional 75 silent speakers. The most common response among Cree language speakers in Thompson was Nehinawewin (Swampy Cree), accounting for 47% of Cree speakers, followed by those who reported Cree, n.o.s. (44%).

A smaller group reported speaking Dene, n.o.s., with 85 speakers and additional 25 silent speakers.

Table 11
Language characteristics for selected Indigenous languages in Thompson, Manitoba, 2021

	Ability to speak	Learned language as				Silent speakers	Average age of mother tongue population	Speaks language at home	
		mother tongue		second language				Most often	Regularly
		number	percent	number	percent			number	number
Cree languages	1,015	580	57	430	42	75	42	175	435
Ililimowin (Moose Cree)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Inu Ayimun (Southern East Cree)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Iyiyiw-Ayimiwin (Northern East Cree)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Nehinawewin (Swampy Cree)	480	255	53	220	46	10	47	90	215
Nehiyawewin (Plains Cree)	40	20	50	15	38	0	x	0	20
Nihithawiwin (Woods Cree)	55	30	55	20	36	0	52	0	35
Cree, n.o.s.	445	265	60	185	42	55	36	65	160
Dene, n.o.s.	85	50	59	40	47	25	30	30	10

... not applicable

x suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the *Statistics Act*

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Regina, SK

Just over one thousand people could speak an Indigenous language well enough to conduct a conversation in Regina (1,035 speakers), in 2021. Four-in-five speakers were First Nations people (80%), 9% were Métis and 3% were Inuit.

Cree languages represented the largest group in Regina, with 765 speakers and 120 silent speakers. Cree, n.o.s. was most commonly reported (49% of Cree speakers) followed by Nehiyawewin (Plains Cree) (46%).

Ojibway languages were spoken by 180 people in Regina, with an additional 45 people who were silent speakers. The vast majority of those in the Ojibway languages group were speakers of Saulteau (Western Ojibway) (89%).

Table 12

Language characteristics for selected Indigenous languages in Regina, Saskatchewan, 2021

	Ability to speak	Learned language as				Silent speakers	Average age of mother tongue population	Speaks language at home	
		mother tongue		second language				Most often	Regularly
		number	percent	number	percent			number	number
Cree languages	765	265	35	500	65	120	44	95	340
Ililimowin (Moose Cree)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Inu Ayimun (Southern East Cree)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Iyiyiw-Ayimiwin (Northern East Cree)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Nehinawewin (Swampy Cree)	30	30	100	0	0	0	42	20	0
Nehiyawewin (Plains Cree)	350	70	20	280	80	70	42	25	220
Nihithawiwin (Woods Cree)	10	10	100	0	0	0	x	0	0
Cree, n.o.s.	375	160	43	210	56	45	44	50	110
Ojibway languages	180	80	44	100	56	45	47	30	65
Anishinaabemowin (Chippewa)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Daawaamwin (Odawa)	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0	0
Saulteau (Western Ojibway)	160	75	47	85	53	50	46	20	60
Ojibway, n.o.s.	10	0	0	10	100	0	...	10	0

... not applicable

x suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the *Statistics Act*

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Conclusions and Limitations

This analysis sought to report on the linguistic profile and trends of Indigenous language speakers living in Census Metropolitan Areas and Census Agglomerations, along with the linguistic profiles of CMAs and CAs where significant numbers of speakers lived.

In general, the findings reflect that while minor growth has occurred in the number of Indigenous language speakers living in CMAs and CAs, the share of speakers has changed little over a twenty-year period. On the other hand, the share of speakers in CMAs and CAs who learned their language as a second language has increased at a significant rate. While part of this change may be reflective of the ongoing work of Indigenous language revitalization within cities, it is also associated with the impact of declining growth or size of the mother tongue population in the denominator.

At the level of specific CMAs and CAs, each area contains its own unique grouping of Indigenous languages. The analysis provided in this report is intended to aid in the identification of which languages in which cities are most in need of intervention.

The specificity with which some respondents report their answers on the Census of Population does create some areas of note. Among those who spoke either a Cree language or an Ojibway language, the majority of respondents reported only “Cree” or only “Ojibway” without specifying further (e.g. “Nehinawewin (Swampy Cree)”). At the level of specific CMAs and CAs, this may present an obstacle to those designing tools for language promotion, as the data does not always point to a specific language or dialect that can be addressed. However, by analysing the other responses in the overall category,⁸ it is possible to make an educated guess at the particular languages that can be best served.

It is worth noting that while the Census includes detailed linguistic information allowing for the capture of languages spoken or known since birth, this does not reflect the number of people who may belong to a particular linguistic community and wish to speak the language. For example, the data reveal that more than 5,000 Indigenous people in Winnipeg spoke an Indigenous language. However, this number reflects just 5% of the total Indigenous population living in the city. Analysis that focuses on the nations to which Indigenous Peoples living in cities belong may be a benefit to understanding the how to best develop Indigenous language programs.

Concepts and Methods

The data sources for this report were the 2021 Census of Population, along with the 2016, 2006 and 2001 cycles, the 2011 National Household Survey (NHS), and the 2022 Indigenous Peoples Survey (IPS).

When comparing estimates from the 2021 Census of Population to previous cycles, the data were adjusted to account for incompletely enumerated reserves. For more information on incompletely enumerated reserves and settlements, see [Incompletely enumerated reserves and settlements](#).

Random rounding and percentage distributions: To ensure the confidentiality of responses collected for the 2021 Census, 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%.

Because of random rounding, counts and percentages may vary slightly between different census products such as the analytical documents, highlight tables and data tables.

Data from the 2022 IPS were calculated using bootstrap weights available on the IPS Masterfile. Variance and significance testing were computed using the PROC SURVEYFREQ method, using SAS EG v. 8.3.

8. Along with relying on the knowledge of the local Indigenous community.

The following terms were used in this report:

Mother tongue – Refers to the first language learned in childhood that is still understood.

Knowledge – Refers to those who were able to speak a given language well enough to conduct a conversation.

Average age – Average age is a good indicator of the general health of a language. The average age of the mother tongue population is an indicator of the intergenerational transmission of an Indigenous language. A language with a young average age implies that children and young people are continuing to acquire an Indigenous language as their first language.

Indigenous language acquisition – This variable refers to how Indigenous language speakers learned the language they speak, whether as a mother tongue or as a second language.

Learned as a mother tongue – This group is comprised of those who reported an Indigenous mother tongue on the 2021 Census and who could still speak that same language well enough to conduct a conversation.

Learned as a second language – This group is comprised of those who could speak an Indigenous language, but who did not report that same language on the mother tongue question.

Silent speakers – This refers to people who have an Indigenous mother tongue, but—while they still understand it—can no longer speak the language well enough to conduct a conversation. In some circumstances, this may reflect those who have not continued to use their mother tongue over time or those who do not have a community of other speakers of the same language with whom to converse.

Home language – This refers to the extent to which respondents speak a given language at home.

Spoken most often at home – This refers to the language the person speaks most often at home at the time of data collection. A person can report more than one language as “spoken most often at home” if the languages are spoken equally often. In many circumstances, a language spoken most often at home could be thought to reflect the speaker’s “main” language.

Language(s) spoken regularly at home – This refers to the language(s), if any, that the person speaks at home on a regular basis at the time of data collection, other than the language(s) they speak most often at home.

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