

Catalogue no. 91F0015M
ISSN 1205-996X
ISBN 978-0-660-78623-0

Demographic Documents

Statistics Canada's reliable and timely system of population

by Laurent Martel

Release date: September 24, 2025



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Published by authority of the Minister responsible for Statistics Canada

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Table of contents

The Census of Population is the starting point for population statistics.....	4
Coverage studies make it possible to adjust census counts	4
Demographic estimates are based on censuses, coverage studies and several administrative data sources	4
High-quality demographic estimates	5
The census and demographic estimates are based on clear definitions	5
Other sources for demographic data at Statistics Canada.....	6
Population projections are not predictions of the future	7

Statistics Canada's reliable and timely system of population statistics

by **Laurent Martel**

Population statistics disseminated by Statistics Canada meet many needs and are one of the pillars of the national statistics system. These statistics are used to redistribute billions of dollars every year between the federal government and the provinces and territories. They are also used to administer many laws and regulations providing services to Canadians across the country. Furthermore, these population statistics enable Statistics Canada to disseminate many key indicators on the economy and society in Canada, such as the unemployment rate and other statistics on productivity, health and crime.

These population statistics are based on various data sources, each of them offering strengths and limitations.

The Census of Population is the starting point for population statistics

Every five years, the Census of Population paints a complete picture of the state of the Canadian population, including its ethnocultural, linguistic, education and labour characteristics. The main strength of this cross-country enumeration is that it provides a reliable image of these population characteristics at disaggregated levels of geography, thus serving various local interests.

Coverage studies make it possible to adjust census counts

Conducting a complete enumeration of the population in a country as large and diverse as Canada presents challenges. Some population groups, such as young adults, recent immigrants and non-permanent residents (NPRs), are more difficult to enumerate than others. For this reason, Statistics Canada conducts coverage studies after each census. Coverage studies conducted through screening surveys and record linkages shed light on how many persons were missed by the census (undercoverage) and how many were enumerated more than once (overcoverage). The methods and results of these coverage studies, along with related analyses, are made public on the Statistics Canada website.

Demographic estimates are based on censuses, coverage studies and several administrative data sources

The population counts from the census, adjusted using the results of coverage studies, form the basis for the demographic estimates produced and released on a quarterly basis by Statistics Canada's Demographic Estimates Program (DEP). As a result, the demographic estimates provide more precise counts of Canada's population than the census. Among G7 countries, Canada and Japan are the only ones that release estimates of the size of the population multiple times a year.

Between censuses and from one quarter to the next, the size of the population is estimated by taking into account all components of population growth. As such, births and landed immigrants are added to the population, while deaths and emigrants are subtracted. For provinces and territories or smaller geographic areas, internal migration must also be considered.

To account for changes in the size of the population over time, various administrative data sources are used. These include vital statistics data for births and deaths; data from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) for the number of permanent and temporary immigrants; and data from the Canada Revenue Agency to calculate internal migration.

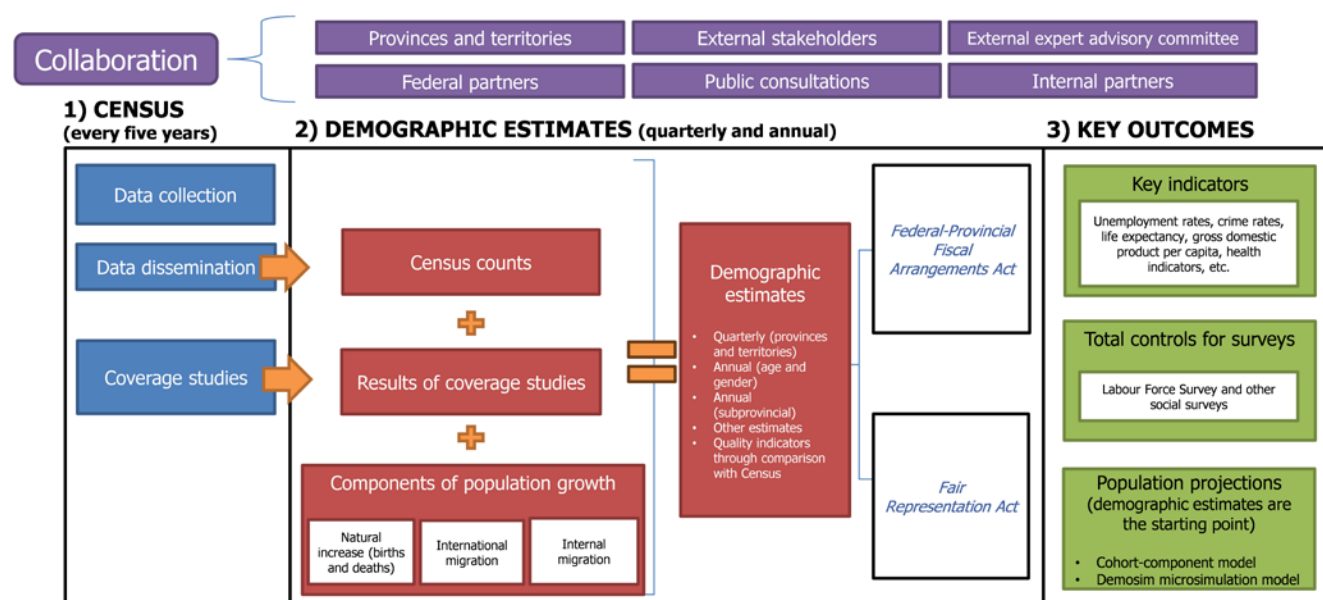
High-quality demographic estimates

Every five years, the quality of the demographic estimates produced at Statistics Canada is rigorously evaluated by comparing the estimates based on the previous census with those based on the new census, each of which has been adjusted using its respective coverage studies. The results of these evaluations are also made publicly available by Statistics Canada.

Statistics Canada's DEP is a dynamic program, with continuous adjustments and new developments being made to the methods and data sources used. This is done to ensure the quality of estimates is maintained, which is critical for the program given the uses of these estimates. Additionally, each methodological adjustment is discussed transparently and in detail with data providers and users, including provincial and territorial statistical representatives. Moreover, technical presentations on methodological adjustments are offered for releases. A methodology guide is also available on the Statistics Canada website.

Statistics Canada's complete system of population statistics can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Statistics Canada's population statistics system



Source: Statistics Canada.

The census and demographic estimates are based on clear definitions

The target population of both the census and Statistics Canada's demographic estimates is the same—all persons whose usual place of residence is in Canada and who therefore regularly use and consume goods and services in the country. This approach is necessary given the uses of population statistics, for example, to calculate transfer payments, define electoral ridings and plan local services, such as schools, hospitals and public transportation.

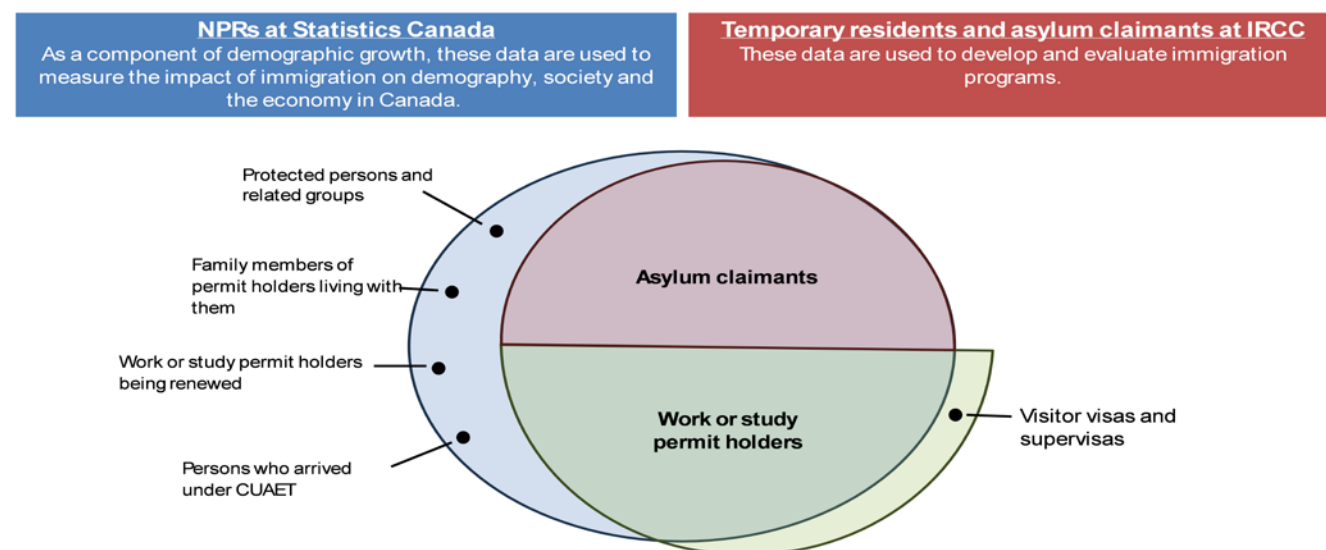
The target population includes Canadians citizens, landed immigrants (permanent residents) and NPRs, that is, study or work permit holders and their family members, asylum claimants, protected persons and related groups, study or work permit holders awaiting extensions, and persons admitted to Canada under the Canada-Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel (CUAET).

The target population excludes individuals holding visitor permits to Canada, since these visitors often spend only a short period in the country, usually as tourists. Moreover, visitor permits may be issued to individuals living abroad who may never actually be physically present in Canada.

It is important to note that the population of NPRs included in Statistics Canada's demographic estimates is not comparable to the temporary resident population as produced and published by IRCC. Figure 2 illustrates the differences between Statistics Canada's population of NPRs and IRCC's temporary resident population.

Figure 2

Comparison of the populations covered by Statistics Canada's non-permanent residents statistics and Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada's temporary residents and asylum claimants statistics



Source: Statistics Canada.

The number of NPRs increased significantly from 2022 to 2024. Some NPRs in Canada are awaiting an extension of their stay through a work or study permit. To account for this phenomenon, the DEP relies on administrative data provided by IRCC, which allows for the identification of permit extensions in the country. This data is updated on a quarterly basis.

As well, Statistics Canada continually seeks new data sources to improve its programs. In the fall of 2024, the agency acquired data from the Canada Border Services Agency, which may be able to validate departures from Canada, such as those of NPRs whose permits have expired, as well as emigrants. The potential integration of this new data source into the DEP will be discussed with key stakeholders in a timely manner and will be the topic of technical presentations to help users understand the nature and scope of the improvements to the program.

Other sources for demographic data at Statistics Canada

Other key programs at Statistics Canada, such as the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and the System of National Accounts (SNA), use demographic estimates for purposes such as survey weighting or the calculation of various social and economic indicators, including gross domestic product per capita.

Additional adjustments are often made to the demographic estimates to account for the specific objectives of these other programs. For example, the target population of the LFS differs from that of the census; as a result, certain population groups—such as residents of institutions or persons living on reserves—are excluded from the demographic estimates to meet the specific needs of the survey. For similar reasons, the methods used to calculate population control totals¹ may differ from those used in the demographic estimates.

The same applies to the SNA, which uses seasonally adjusted demographic estimates to ensure consistency across the indicators it publishes. As a result, these estimates are not fully comparable to other demographic estimates produced by Statistics Canada.

1. [Interpreting population totals from the Labour Force Survey.](#)

Population projections are not predictions of the future

Statistics Canada also produces various series of population projections that address important planning needs for a wide range of users—for example, the Bank of Canada for monetary policy; Finance Canada for the federal budget; the Parliamentary Budget Officer; IRCC for planning permanent and temporary immigration levels, including Francophone immigration; and Canadian Heritage for policies related to official languages.

Projections can be seen as an extension of the demographic estimates, following the same logic of annual demographic accounting: births and immigrants are added to the base population, and deaths and emigrants are subtracted. A variety of projection models are used, depending on user needs. Since the future is by definition uncertain, Statistics Canada develops a range of assumptions related to the demographic components and combines them into future scenarios. Multiple scenarios are always provided, offering users several possible futures based on different trajectories for fertility, mortality and migrations. All assumptions and scenarios are developed based on long-term and recent trends and in consultation with key stakeholders, including experts from various federal departments and both Canadian and international demographers.

In this context, Statistics Canada's population projections should never be considered predictions of the future, but rather an essential tool for planning programs and services for all Canadians. These projections are valuable at the time they are produced, since they draw on the best available information at the moment. Given the rapid pace of demographic change in recent years, Statistics Canada ensures that its projections are updated annually and allows users to develop custom projections to meet specific needs.