



# Defining ABORIGINAL POPULATIONS:

## *The Forecasting and Planning Challenge*

by Colette Isaac and David J. Stinson

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**P**lanning can be defined as “a process of choosing between various courses of action for purposes of generating a greater degree of satisfaction than would otherwise have been achieved within the constraints of available resources”. What this belies is planning as a modernist paradigm, where rational choices are made based on scientific information. It has served most planners well, particularly in the past, and where market development was a priority. But as we slowly become a pluralist society, such an approach may no longer work, especially if community development is the goal.

A less academic definition might be that planning is “the integration of knowledge to take action”. It is one that fits a more traditional paradigm that many Aboriginal people still possess. Most native languages have no word for “planning”, but there is an Anishnaabek phrase that captures the essence beautifully, “*neegan naanaa gdawendang*”, which translates as “thinking ahead carefully”. In this sense, planning has always taken place in native communities. But the rational mode of planning was something that was typically done on behalf of First Nations. This started to change during the last quarter of the previous century, especially for those communities that have achieved a measure of self-government or secured some form of economic self-reliance.

The challenge has been to adapt to this new mode while accommodating custom, without treating either mode as an absolute choice. Not an easy transition, particularly if the community is under the stress of rapidly changing conditions. However, for many aspects of conventional planning the federal government has retained control. One such area is demographics. Here the burgeoning

### Summary

*Aboriginal people have always planned for their communities. But planning, as conventionally defined, has been something typically done for, not by, indigenous communities. This is changing, as the opportunity for self-government has increased. However, the demographic foundation of planning is still largely in the hands of the federal government. Contact with Europeans has had an enduring impact on the number of native people, including who was called an “Indian” – and more importantly, who was not. The current definition, as outlined in Bill C-31, contains provisions for the eventual elimination of “Status Indians”. This contrasts starkly with the growing number of self-defined Aboriginal people. The implications for planning are manifold, from knowing which “community” is being worked with, to developing an appropriate population forecasting model, to financing the service and infrastructure needs, to the ramifications for cultural survival. Understanding these challenges can assist native communities in planning for their futures.*

### Résumé

*Les peuples autochtones ont toujours planifié leurs collectivités. Mais envisagée au sens classique, la planification a souvent été exécutée pour les collectivités autochtones et non par les collectivités autochtones. Ce phénomène est en voie de changer avec l'évolution de l'autonomie gouvernementale. Toutefois, le fondement démographique de la planification demeure en grande partie dans le giron fédéral. Le contact avec les Européens a eu des effets persistants sur le nombre d'Autochtones, y compris sur qui pouvait être appelé un « Indien » – et surtout, sur qui ne pouvait pas l'être. La définition actuelle, incluse au projet de loi C-31, prévoit des dispositions pour l'élimination éventuelle du « statut d'Indien ». Cela s'inscrit en faux contre le nombre grandissant de gens qui se disent Autochtones. Les répercussions au niveau de la planification sont nombreuses : comment savoir précisément quelle est la collectivité en cause, comment élaborer un modèle adéquat de projection démographique, comment financer les besoins en services et en infrastructures et enfin, quelles sont les ramifications touchant la survie culturelle. Bien cerner ces difficultés peut aider les collectivités autochtones à planifier leur avenir.*

movement for self-definition is largely ignored, since the government continues to fund First Nations based on the federal definition of who belongs.

This issue of First Nation demographics became very apparent to the authors while working in native communities, where the usual planning assumptions rarely apply; i.e., the population of a municipality is known, growth is given, projections are made, policy is established, and development proceeds according to market demands. Conventional population projections are still used to calculate health, education, housing, and physical infrastructure programmes. However, actual population numbers are far more difficult to determine, let alone predict. Not only has it created challenges in forecasting growth for immediate needs, it has created an emerging crisis of self-definition for First Nations<sup>3</sup> on reserves, as well as for urban, Métis, and Inuit populations who also struggle to gain some control over their futures.

### Impact of Contact on Aboriginal Populations

Aboriginal people are a circumscribed population with a long history of “circumscription”. There is some debate about exactly when the first peoples arrived in North America, but by the time of European contact, they had developed self-governing societies with complex economic and political organizations and had intricate ecological and cultural relationships to the land and to each other. There is even more debate surrounding the numbers of people in North America at that time.<sup>4</sup> Population estimates range from one million to 18 million north of Mexico,<sup>5</sup> and in Canada between a low of 500,000<sup>6</sup> to a high of two million people.<sup>5</sup> But regardless of initial numbers, contact brought upheaval to native societies through “virgin-soil epidemics”,<sup>7</sup> and military belligerence such as the 1609 - 1701 Iroquois War with New France, the 1613 - 1761 Mi’kmaq War with Britain,<sup>6</sup> the genocide, by 1827, of the Beothuk in Newfoundland, etc. Under the more peaceful conditions of the fur trade, intermarriage was encouraged but created issues of official designation. Starvation also weakened certain vulnerable communities, as fur-bearers

were eventually hunted below viable levels and pioneering made food animals such as the bison, salmon, and caribou scarcer.

### Manipulation of Native Demography by Canada

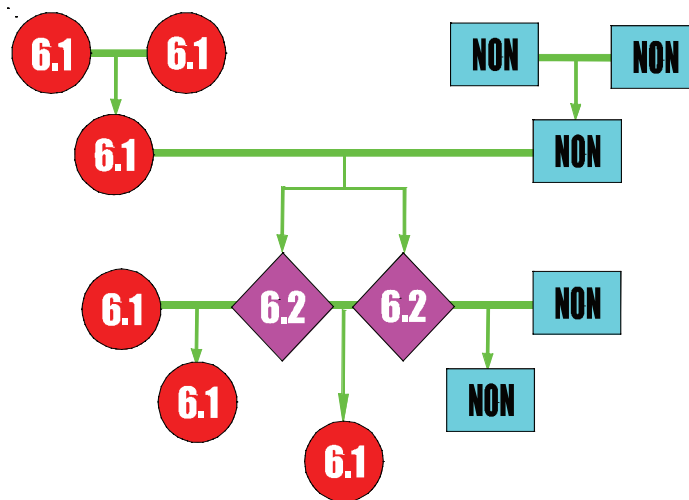
The first census after Confederation counted 102,358 “Indians” in 1871, somewhere between one-fifth and one-twentieth of the population estimate at contact.<sup>8,9</sup> In 1876, the Dominion Government revised earlier colonial legislation with the introduction of the *Indian Act*. It defined an “Indian” as any male person of Aboriginal blood reputed to belong to a particular band, his children, and any woman to whom he was lawfully married. Aboriginal women who married non-Indians were excluded, along with all of her descendants. The term “band” was introduced, referring to a more-or-less settled community; any Aboriginal people who did not live on a fixed and clearly-defined land base were excluded from the definition.

By the time the *Indian Act* was amended in 1951, the population of Indians in Canada had reached 165,607,<sup>9</sup> a growth of 62% since 1871. The rest of Canada saw an increase of 370%.<sup>10</sup> Among other things a centralized Indian Register was established to number and keep track of all persons entitled to Indian benefits as conferred by Canada. It continued to specify who was an Indian, but it also was very specific about who was not an Indian. The blatant gender discrimination

of these membership provisions were challenged before the Supreme Court of Canada and the Human Rights Committee of the United Nations. In 1985, Bill C-31, an Act to amend the *Indian Act* abolished the gender discrimination clauses, and allowed for the reinstatement of any status lost because of them. The immediate impact of Bill C-31 was the reinstatement of 114,500 people, mostly women who had lost status through marriage and their children. By 1990 the Indian status population had risen by 19%, to approximately 416,500.<sup>11</sup>

Currently, Indian status can no longer be gained or lost, only inherited. However, the new provisions in Bill C-31 created two categories of Indians – “6.1” and “6.2” (referring to specific clauses in the Act). Though individuals of either category are eligible for the same benefits, the status category of anyone born after 1985 is dependent on that of their parents (see Figure 1). Any parent with 6.1 status will confer either 6.1 or 6.2 status to their children, i.e. they will be Indians. A parent with 6.2 status will confer either 6.1 or no status to their children, i.e. they may be Indians. Two successive generations of children born to status/non-status couples results in a non-status child who is not eligible to be listed in the official Indian Register. While no longer “counted” by Canada, many of these children continue to live in their First Nations with their parents.

FIGURE 1: INHERITANCE RULES FOR INDIAN STATUS ELIGIBILITY



### Status Eligibility

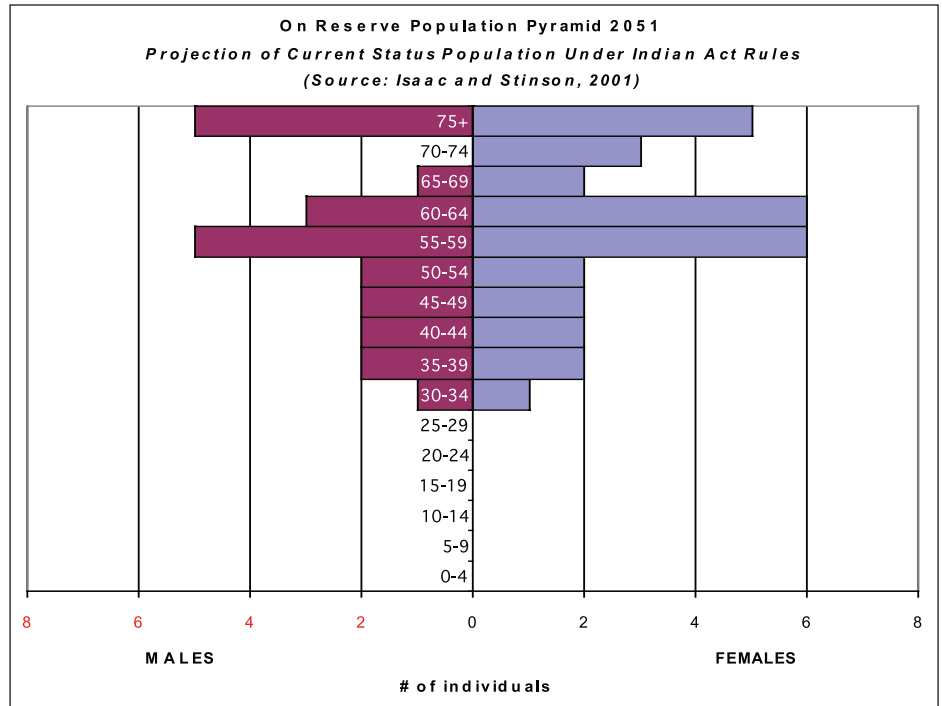
## Projecting First Nation Numbers

Around the turn of the millennium the authors conducted population projections for five Ontario First Nation communities. The challenges were unique, given the complexity of native demography imposed by the *Indian Act* such as status categories, “out-marriages”, male “fertility” (no, native men don’t actually give birth, but they are used as proxies for the birth of a status child from an uncounted, non-native spouse), and the like. Our efforts were based on the seminal work of Stewart Clathworthy.<sup>12</sup> Using the Bill C-31 rules for status extinguishment, he projected that between 2005 and 2010, 18% of the newborn population of status Indians would not be eligible for Indian status. Population growth could be expected for the next 40 years to be followed by a rapid decline. If current trends continue (including high levels of “out-marriage” and declining fertility), by the fifth generation no more children will be born who are eligible for Indian status.<sup>13</sup> The authors own work projected that within a generation the official numbers would begin to decline within the communities studied. Eventually, these communities would have no status children, as illustrated in Figure 2. Both Guimond<sup>14</sup> and Clathworthy<sup>13</sup> see the end to the population incline that Aboriginal people are currently experiencing. Those demographic factors that have reduced fertility in society at large are also playing out in native communities, and will stabilize and once again reduce population numbers. Our own work has also indicated this.<sup>15</sup>

### Aboriginal Self-definition

But defining which “community” and thus which data-set to use in projecting populations is getting even more complex. In 2006, there were approximately 565,000 registered status Indians, yet almost 1.2 million people identified themselves as an Aboriginal person, including Métis, non-status Indian, and Inuit.<sup>16</sup> Simple natural increase (births minus deaths) cannot account for this growth. In recent decades, events such as the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Oka, and Ipperwash have restored indigenous pride, and have encouraged people to declare a new ethnic affiliation.

**FIGURE 2: POPULATION PYRAMID SHOWING EFFECTS OF STATUS EXTINGUISHMENT**



In his 2003 article, “Fuzzy Definitions and Population Explosion”, Guimond discusses the concept of ethnic mobility associated with self-identification, and its effect on the various ways that Aboriginal populations are counted.<sup>14</sup> The challenge for the planner is to know and understand the population they are working with.

### Implications for Planning with Aboriginal People

The effect that these issues of definition have on planning for First Nation reserves is substantial. Though anticipated by such analysis, the communities’ awareness of this has hit home as those born or reinstated after 1985 began starting their own families. By 2007, the rising level of concern led to a national gathering of native leaders at the E-dbendaagzijig “Those Who Belong” First Nation Citizenship and Status Conference, where the authors presented a method for assessing the implications of Indian status extinguishment at the community level. But we have also had the opportunity to adapt this model for other purposes, since accurately forecasting for infrastructure projects, economic development, education and health programmes, and land use will be affected by who gets counted and the

projection models used.<sup>15</sup> Our studies always looked at the fate of specific population segments such as pre-school, primary school, work force, etc.

A particular community specifically requested the examination of the growing numbers of its elders, to better anticipate their needs. Another First Nation, alerted to the fact that the federal Indian Register does not reflect the growing uncounted population, used our calculations to size a water treatment plant, a project which is currently under way. We were also able to estimate the entire native and non-native population of a tourist-oriented community as one of the bases for determining growth in the size of their local retail market.<sup>17,18</sup> In another instance, a new economic venture provided an incentive for people to return home. The prospects that an industrial facility, since built, would increase the population needed to be anticipated, so we complemented the model with several migration scenarios to project the effects of a more liberal membership code.<sup>19</sup> One community we worked with is facing status ineligibility for a large proportion of their youth. Based on the foreknowledge provided by our forecasts, they have taken on the challenge of educating all their post-secondary aged children; even

those who will not receive the federal funding the others are entitled to.

## Lessons Observed

1. Conventional projections may suffice for now.
2. As the gap between official and dispossessed numbers widens, they may not.
3. As official “Indians” disappear the funding that is tied to Indian status will reduce the government’s fiscal obligations.
4. This seems to be the intent of Bill C-31.
5. This gap has no actual meaning in self-definition terms, but communities must accept the cultural and fiscal implications.
6. Native populations can be projected and can have practical implications for immediate needs.
7. Further work is needed, particularly with groups less under the purview of the *Indian Act*, such as urban and landless Aboriginals, Métis, and Inuit.<sup>20</sup>

The long-term effects of circumscription by outsiders have profoundly altered the demographic evolution of Aboriginal people. But just because they have not been counted does not mean they are not there. Planners who work with Aboriginal people can assist them by understanding both the history and the desire of these unique populations to define themselves and thus regain control over their own futures. ■

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## References and Notes

1. The term Aboriginal is used to refer to anyone of indigenous ancestry and may include status Indians, non-status Indians, Metis and Inuit.
2. This phrase was used in a cultural statement submitted as evidence to the Ontario Municipal Board in December 2001. One of the authors was acting as the community’s planning advisor in a land dispute with a developer. The words of wisdom contained in the statement were graciously provided by Merle Assance Beedie, Elder to Beausoleil First Nation.
3. First Nation refers to Indian bands located on a reserve.
4. Estimation methods include anecdotal evidence, civil and church records, archaeological and anthropological artefacts, carrying capacity, and known mortality rates of identifiable diseases. See: Aberth J. *The first horseman: Disease in human history*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education Inc.; 2007.
5. Thornton R. Historical demography. In: Biolsi T, editor. *A companion to the anthropology of American Indians*. Malden, MA: Blackwell; 2004:24-47.
6. Dickason OP. *Canada’s First Nations: A history of founding peoples from earliest times*. Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press; 2002.
7. Virgin soil epidemics were infectious diseases including smallpox, measles, influenza, dysentery, diphtheria, typhus, yellow fever, whooping cough, tuberculosis, syphilis and other unidentified “fevers”; so named because they did not occur in North America before European introduction, and there was no natural immunity in existing populations. Regional impacts varied, but some indigenous communities lost up to 90% of their inhabitants. See: Waldram JB, Herring DA, Young TK. *Aboriginal health in Canada: Historical, cultural, and epidemiological perspectives*, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Toronto: University of Toronto Press; 2006.
8. The term Indian is used very specifically to refer to those individuals of Aboriginal descent who are defined by the *Indian Act*. It is often combined with “status” to indicate legal definition by Canada, whereas “non-status” refers to no recognition by Canada.
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13. Clathworthy S. *Reassessing the population impacts of Bill C-31*. Cat. No. R2-363/2004EPDF. Ottawa: Indian and Northern Affairs Canada; 2001.
14. Guimond E. *Fuzzy definitions and population explosion: Changing identities of Aboriginal groups in Canada*. In: Newhouse D, Peters E, eds. *Not Strangers in These Parts: Urban Aboriginal People*. Ottawa: Policy Research Initiative; 2003:35-50.
15. Isaac C, Stinson DJ. *The Disappearance of Canada’s Indigenous Populations: Complexities of Forecasting Growth in Native Communities*. Unpublished paper; 2001.
16. Statistics Canada *Aboriginal peoples in Canada: Inuit, Metis and First Nations 2006 census*. Cat. No. 97-558-XIE2006001. Ottawa: Statistics Canada; 2008.
17. Isaac C, Stinson DJ. *Uncovering the future: An improved tool for analyzing population trends in First Nation communities*. Presented Sept. 1999 at the UOI Gathering Strength Conference, Whitefish Lake First Nation; 1999.
18. Isaac C, Stinson DJ. *Moose Deer Point First Nation Retail Feasibility Study*. Ogemawahj Tribal Council; 1999.
19. Isaac C, Stinson DJ. *Pottawatomi of Moose Deer Point First Nation Projection of 1999 on-Reserve Population*. Ogemawahj Tribal Council; 2000.
20. Our model has recently been adapted by the Université Laval to study the remnant of the extirpated Huron-Wendat Nation surviving in Québec.