
Census in Brief

Indigenous languages across Canada

Census of Population, 2021



Release date: March 29, 2023

How to obtain more information

For information about this product or the wide range of services and data available from Statistics Canada, visit our website, www.statcan.gc.ca.

You can also contact us by

Email at infostats@statcan.gc.ca

Telephone, from Monday to Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., at the following numbers:

- | | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|
| • Statistical Information Service | 1-800-263-1136 |
| • National telecommunications device for the hearing impaired | 1-800-363-7629 |
| • Fax line | 1-514-283-9350 |

Standards of service to the public

Statistics Canada is committed to serving its clients in a prompt, reliable and courteous manner. To this end, Statistics Canada has developed standards of service that its employees observe. To obtain a copy of these service standards, please contact Statistics Canada toll-free at 1-800-263-1136. The service standards are also published on www.statcan.gc.ca under “Contact us” > “[Standards of service to the public](#).”

Note of appreciation

Canada owes the success of its statistical system to a long-standing partnership between Statistics Canada, the citizens of Canada, its businesses, governments and other institutions. Accurate and timely statistical information could not be produced without their continued co-operation and goodwill.

Published by authority of the Minister responsible for Statistics Canada

© His Majesty the King in Right of Canada as represented by the Minister of Industry, 2023

All rights reserved. Use of this publication is governed by the Statistics Canada [Open Licence Agreement](#).

An [HTML version](#) is also available.

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français.

Release date: March 29, 2023

Catalogue number 98-200-X, issue 2021012

ISBN 978-0-660-47944-6

Highlights

- Approximately 237,420 Indigenous people in Canada reported they could speak an Indigenous language well enough to conduct a conversation in 2021, down by 10,750, or 4.3%, from 2016. This is the first decline since comparable data started being collected in 1991.
- The number of Indigenous people reporting an Indigenous language as the language they first learned at home in childhood continues to decline. There were 184,170 Indigenous people with an Indigenous mother tongue in 2021, down 14,120, or -7.1%, from 2016.
- The number and share of Indigenous language speakers who learned their language as a second language continue to rise. Over one-quarter (27.7%) of Indigenous language speakers in 2021 learned it as their second language, up from 24.8% in 2016.
- With over 70 Indigenous languages being spoken across Canada, there is a diversity of experiences across the country. While most Indigenous languages experienced declines, some experienced a revitalization with large proportional growth. For example, the number of Indigenous speakers of Haisla, Halkomelem, Heiltsuk and Michif all grew by a third (33.3%) or more since 2016.

Introduction

Indigenous peoples have consistently stressed the importance of language as the primary tool to share and communicate culture, world views and values to future generations (Assembly of First Nations, 2019). The right to language was outlined in Article 13 (1) of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: “Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons” (United Nations, 2007).

More than 70 distinct Indigenous languages are currently spoken by First Nations people, Métis and Inuit in Canada. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO) *Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger*, all Indigenous languages spoken in Canada are considered at risk, being classified as either vulnerable, definitely endangered, severely endangered or critically endangered¹ (C. Moseley, 2010). As documented by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (Volume 5, 2015), this risk is the result of intergenerational impacts of cultural genocide and discriminatory colonial policies, most notably residential schools, which aimed to destroy Indigenous cultures and languages by forcibly removing Indigenous children from their families and assimilating them by punishing and shaming the use of Indigenous languages.

The *Indigenous Languages Act* was passed in 2019 to preserve, promote and revitalize Indigenous languages in Canada and to support the efforts of Indigenous peoples to reclaim, revitalize, maintain and strengthen their languages (*Indigenous Languages Act*, 2019). UNESCO has declared 2022 to 2032 as the International Decade of Indigenous Languages to draw attention to the critical loss of Indigenous languages and the urgent need to preserve and promote them nationally and around the world (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2021).

This article uses data from the 2021 Census of Population to examine the Indigenous languages spoken by First Nations people, Métis and Inuit in Canada, highlighting the diversity of Indigenous languages by geographic region.²

1. Definitions of language endangerment can be found in the *Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger*. However, in simple terms, “a language is endangered if it is not being passed on to younger generations” (C. Moseley, 2010).

2. While 2.4% of Indigenous language speakers were part of the non-Indigenous population, this analysis focuses solely on the Indigenous population in Canada unless otherwise stated.

Incompletely enumerated reserves and settlements in the 2021 Census of Population

During the 2021 Census of Population, 63 census subdivisions defined as reserves and settlements were [incompletely enumerated](#). For these reserves and settlements, enumeration either was not permitted or could not be completed for various reasons, such as evacuations because of forest fires or access restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Counts of speakers for some languages were more impacted by incompletely enumerated reserves and settlements than others. For example, the Tsuu T'ina language and Iroquoian languages, such as Mohawk and Cayuga, are undercounted as reserves and settlements associated with these languages did not participate in the census. Regionally, other languages may be more impacted than others.

To make appropriate comparisons across time, calculations of growth within this document are conducted by adjusting for incompletely enumerated reserves and settlements.

Indigenous language concepts in the census

In this article, “Indigenous language speakers” or people who “can speak an Indigenous language” are those who reported one or more Indigenous languages to the following census question: “What language(s), **other than English or French**, can this person speak well enough to conduct a conversation?” There are no follow-up questions about levels of proficiency. More detailed data on reported level of proficiency in Indigenous languages, including levels below a conversational level, are available in the Indigenous Peoples Survey (IPS). Data from the 2022 IPS will be available in 2024.

“Indigenous mother tongue speakers” are those who reported one or more Indigenous languages to the question: “What is the language that this person **first learned** at home **in childhood** and **still understands**?”.

“Indigenous second-language speakers” are those who reported that they speak an Indigenous language well enough to conduct a conversation but who did not report an Indigenous mother tongue.

The number of Indigenous people who can speak an Indigenous language declines for the first time since comparable data started being collected in 1991

Approximately 237,420 Indigenous people in Canada reported that they could [speak an Indigenous language well enough to conduct a conversation in 2021](#), a decline of 10,750 speakers (-4.3%) from 2016 and the first decline since comparable data started being collected in 1991. The percentage of Indigenous people who can speak an Indigenous language has been steadily declining over time. In 2021, 13.1% of the Indigenous population reported being able to speak an Indigenous language well enough to conduct a conversation, down from 15.0% in 2016, 17.2% in 2011 and 21.4% in 2006.

The decline in Indigenous language speakers was driven by an ongoing decrease in the number of Indigenous people with an Indigenous mother tongue. [Mother tongue](#) is the language first learned at home in childhood and still understood. In 2021, 184,170 Indigenous people had an Indigenous mother tongue, a decline of 14,120 (-7.1%) from 2016. It is apparent that younger generations are less likely to have an Indigenous mother tongue than older generations.

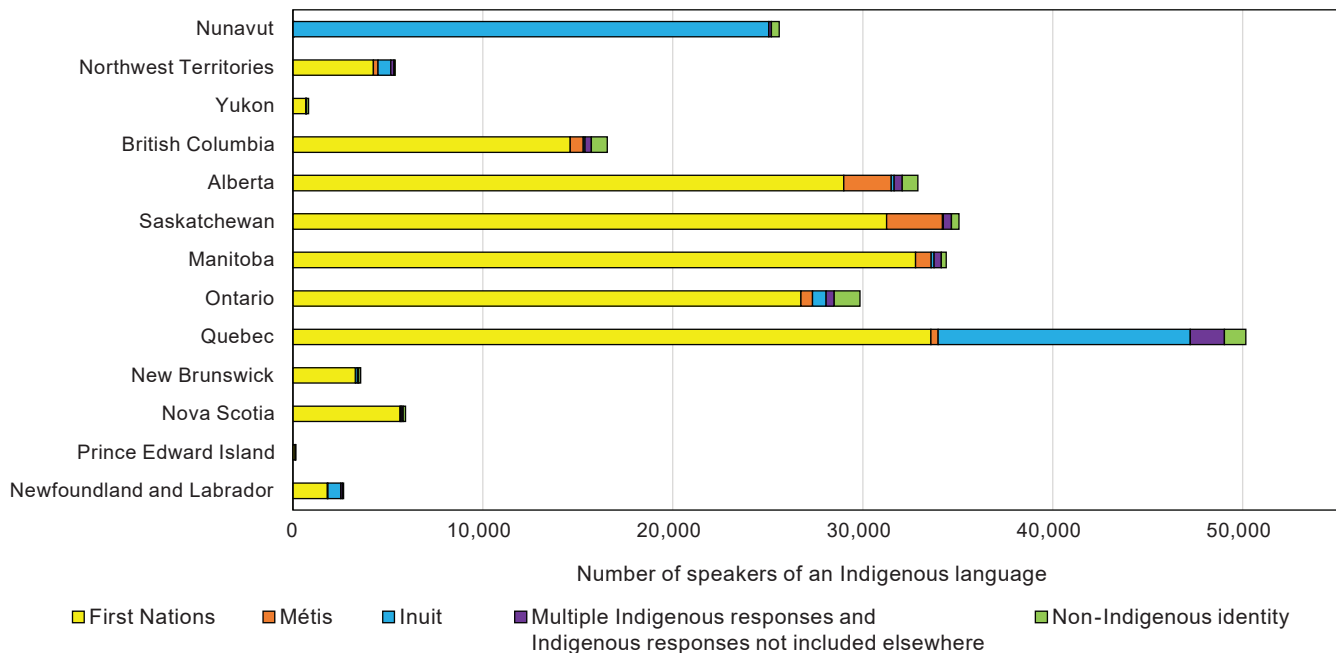
Indigenous languages across Canada

More Indigenous people are learning an Indigenous language as a second language

The number and share of Indigenous language speakers who learned their language as a second language continue to rise. There were 65,680 Indigenous people who reported speaking an Indigenous language but did not report an Indigenous mother tongue. This suggests that they learned the language as a second language. Second-language speakers accounted for over one-quarter (27.7%) of Indigenous language speakers overall, up 4,100 speakers, or 6.7%, from 2016, when 24.8% of Indigenous language speakers had learned the language as a second language.

Chart 1

Quebec has the largest share of Indigenous language speakers nationally



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Indigenous languages are spoken across Canada. In 2021, 14 cities³ were home to over 1,000 residents who spoke an Indigenous language (Chart 2).

Winnipeg was home to Canada's largest community of people who could speak an Indigenous language, particularly First Nations people who could speak an Indigenous language (4,710).

Edmonton had the highest number of Métis who could speak an Indigenous language (620), despite having a smaller Métis population than Winnipeg.

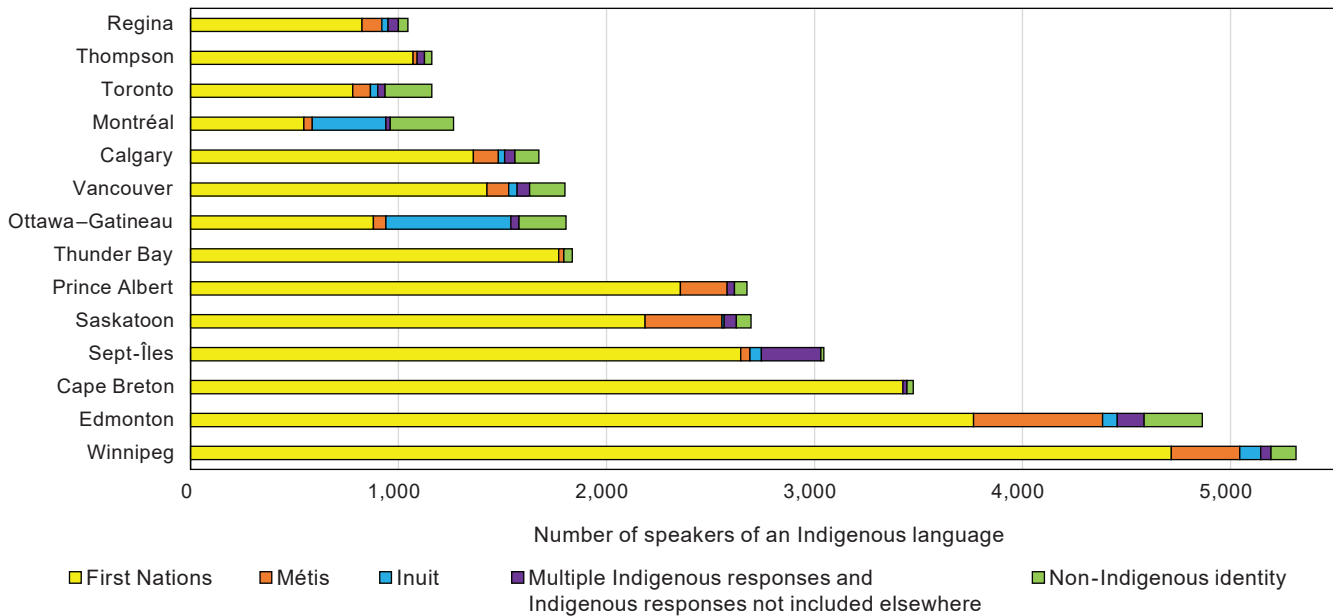
Ottawa–Gatineau had the largest population of Inuit who could speak an Indigenous language (600), followed by Montréal (360).

3. City is defined here to include both [census metropolitan areas](#) and [census agglomerations](#).

Indigenous languages across Canada

Chart 2
Over 5,000 people in Winnipeg can speak an Indigenous language

Census metropolitan areas or census agglomerations



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

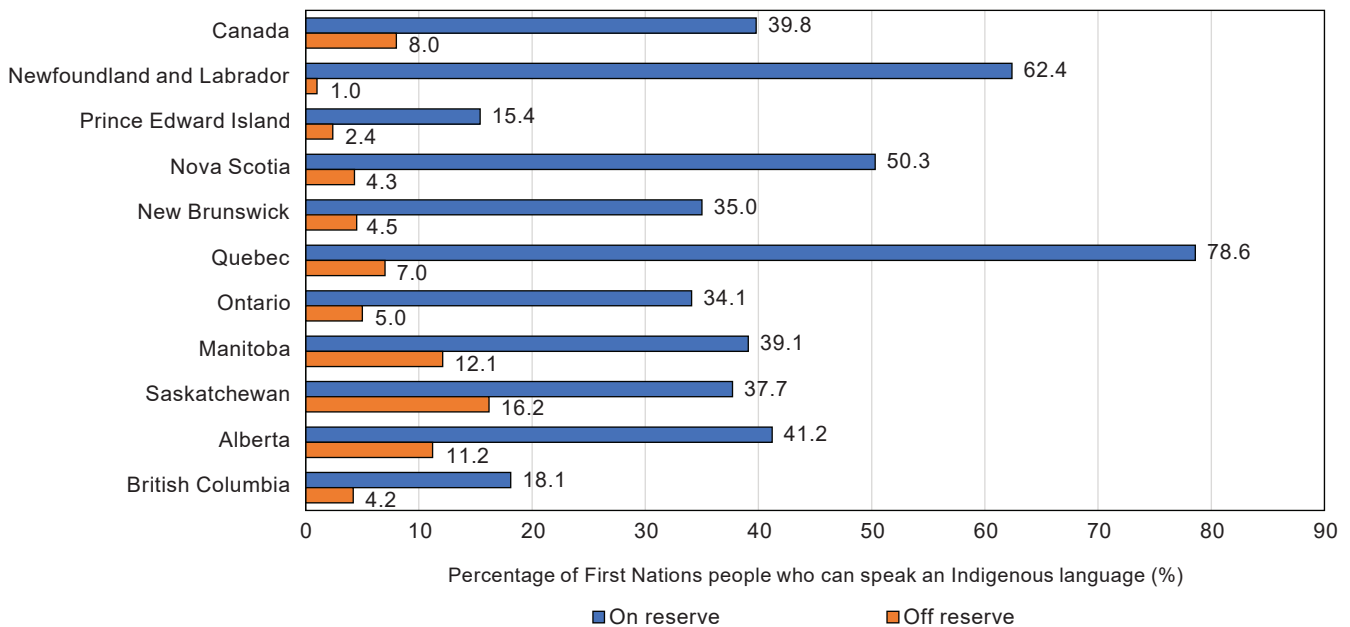
Most First Nations people who speak an Indigenous language live on reserve

Over two-thirds (67.8%) of the 183,790 First Nations people who reported they could speak an Indigenous language lived on reserve in 2021, highlighting the importance of community in language retention. Since most on-reserve residents are First Nations people, it can be easier to learn and retain an Indigenous language when hearing it spoken and used every day. In 2021, 39.8% of First Nations people living on reserve could speak an Indigenous language, compared with 8.0% of those living off reserve (Chart 3).

Indigenous languages across Canada

Chart 3

First Nations people living on reserve are much more likely to speak an Indigenous language than those living off reserve



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Several endangered Indigenous languages in British Columbia have grown considerably since 2016

The diversity of Indigenous languages is most pronounced in British Columbia. There are 22 First Nations languages that were reported almost exclusively in British Columbia, with over 90% of their speakers living within the province. It is the primary home to three distinct language families (Salish, Tsimshian and Wakashan) and two isolated languages (Haida and Ktunaxa [Kutenai]) that are not related to any other language. Many of these languages have fewer than 1,000 speakers.

There were 180,085 First Nations people in British Columbia in 2021, of whom 14,595 could speak an Indigenous language well enough to conduct a conversation, down 7.1% from 2016. Over half (58.1%) of the First Nations people who speak an Indigenous language in British Columbia learned it as a second language later in life, up from 52.1% in 2016. This was the highest share of second-language learners nationally.

In British Columbia, 5.1% of First Nations children aged 14 years and younger could speak an Indigenous language, compared with over one in five adults aged 65 years and older (21.1%).

However, this was not true for all languages. For example, the share of First Nations children in British Columbia who could speak Squamish was 1.3 times higher than that of seniors. Similarly, Halkomelem was more often spoken by children aged 14 years and younger than adults aged 65 years and older.

Several endangered First Nations languages primarily spoken in British Columbia experienced a revival, such as Heiltsuk (up 173.9%, or +200 speakers) and Haisla (up 57.1%, or +100 speakers).

Indigenous languages across Canada

Table 1

Most Indigenous languages in British Columbia have fewer than 1,000 First Nations people who are able to speak the language

Selected Indigenous languages	British Columbia	
	2021 number	Change from 2016 percent
Dakelh (Carrier)	1,495	-24.7
Halkomelem	1,300	33.3
Gitksan (Gitksan)	1,080	-13.9
Nisga'a	1,025	0.5
Secwepemctsin (Shuswap)	1,010	-14.4
Cree languages	920	-16.0
Tsilhqot'in (Chilcotin)	830	-14.9
Kwak'wala (Kwakiutl)	730	27.0
Syilx (Okanagan)	635	-19.1
Nuu-chah-nulth (Nootka)	635	23.3
Lillooet	570	-26.0
Ntlakapamux (Thompson)	460	13.6
Tsimshian	425	4.9
Squamish	335	21.8
Heiltsuk	315	173.9
Haisla	275	57.1
Straits	270	-21.7
Wetsuwet'en-Babine	230	17.9
Tahltan	215	-14.0
Dane-zaa (Beaver)	205	-16.3
Haida	190	-56.3
Ktunaxa (Kutenai)	185	12.1
Tse'khene (Sekani)	130	-27.8
Tlingit	20	-66.7

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016 and 2021.

Just over half of First Nations people who speak an Indigenous language live in the Prairie provinces

Altogether, 93,030 First Nations people reported being able to speak an Indigenous language in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba in 2021, accounting for just over half (50.6%) of all First Nations people who could speak an Indigenous language in Canada.

There were 4.9%, or 4,770, fewer First Nations people who could speak an Indigenous language in the Prairies in 2021 than five years earlier, mostly because of an aging population of mother tongue speakers. For example, First Nations adults aged 65 and older (54.6%) were four times more likely to speak an Indigenous language than children aged 14 and younger (13.7%). This trend held across each of the Prairie provinces.

In 2021, 28,725 First Nations people in the Prairie provinces had learned an Indigenous language as a second language, up 7.0% (+1,890 speakers) from 2016. Almost one-third (30.9%) of First Nations people who could speak an Indigenous language in the Prairies learned it as their second language, up from 27.4% in 2016.

Over three in five First Nations people who could speak an Indigenous language in the Prairie provinces (61.4%) spoke a Cree language (57,135 people). Nevertheless, Cree languages experienced the largest numerical decline in speakers (-4,890, or -7.9%) since 2016. Fewer First Nations people were also speaking Ojibway languages (-875 speakers, or -8.7%) or Dene (-860 speakers, or -8.3%).

Conversely, the Blackfoot language experienced the fastest growth among First Nations languages in the Prairie provinces, increasing by 1,025 speakers, or 18.9%, from 2016 to 2021.

Table 2
Cree is the most spoken Indigenous language among First Nations people in the Prairies

Selected Indigenous Languages	Prairie provinces		Manitoba		Saskatchewan		Alberta	
	2021	Change from 2016	2021	Change from 2016	2021	Change from 2016	2021	Change from 2016
	number	percent	number	percent	number	percent	number	percent
Cree languages	57,135	-7.9	15,520	-11.0	22,730	-7.4	18,880	-5.9
Dene	9,515	-8.3	835	-4.0	7,010	-7.7	1,670	-12.6
Ojibway languages	9,225	-8.7	7,060	-11.5	1,230	-2.8	935	8.1
Oji-Cree	8,905	11.0	8,865	10.9	15	...	30	...
Blackfoot	6,450	18.8	0	...	10	...	6,440	18.9
Dakota	1,400	-3.4	835	11.3	375	-8.5	185	-35.1
Stoney	865	10.2	0	...	15	...	855	11.0
Slavey-Hare languages	360	30.9	0	...	0	...	360	30.9
Assiniboine	325	..	10	..	185	..	130	..
Michif	190	123.5	40	...	135	125.0	15	...
Tsuu T'ina (Sarsi) ¹	165	73.7	0	...	0	...	165	73.7

.. not available for a specific reference period

... not applicable

1. Language primarily associated with incompletely enumerated reserves and settlements.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016 and 2021.

Largest growth in Indigenous second-language acquisition among First Nations people in Ontario

Just over 1 in 10 First Nations people living in Ontario (10.7%, or 26,750 of the 251,030 First Nations people in the province) could speak an Indigenous language in 2021, down 2,770 speakers, or 9.4%, from 2016. Just over two in five First Nations people who speak an Indigenous language in Ontario (40.7%, or 10,895 people) spoke an Indigenous language as a second language, up 18.9% from 2016, when 31.0% of speakers were second-language speakers. This was the fastest pace of growth among second-language speakers nationally.

First Nations adults aged 65 and older in Ontario were over twice as likely to speak an Indigenous language as First Nations children aged 14 and younger (17.6% versus 7.5%).

Ojibway languages were the most spoken Indigenous languages among First Nations people in Ontario (14,535 speakers).

Oji-Cree was the second most spoken language and had a notable decline of 15.6%, or 1,140 speakers, from 2016.

Cree languages were the third most spoken among First Nations people in Ontario (4,790 speakers).

One-third fewer people could speak Anicinabemowin (Algonquin) than in 2016. In 2021, 120 First Nations people reported speaking the language well enough to conduct a conversation, making it among the most vulnerable languages in the province.

Table 3
Ojibway languages are the most spoken Indigenous language among First Nations people in Ontario

Selected Indigenous Languages	Ontario	
	2021 number	Change from 2016 percent
Ojibway languages	14,535	-6.5
Oji-Cree	6,165	-15.6
Cree languages	4,790	-4.8
Mohawk ¹	1,030	6.7
Cayuga ¹	210	82.6
Oneida ¹	195	11.4
Anicinabemowin (Algonquin)	120	-31.4

1. Language primarily associated with incompletely enumerated reserves and settlements.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016 and 2021.

Quebec has the most First Nations people who can speak an Indigenous language nationally

Quebec was home to the largest number of First Nations people who could speak an Indigenous language (33,590) among the provinces in 2021. While just over 1 in 10 First Nations people nationally lived in Quebec in 2021, the province accounted for 18.3% of First Nations people who could speak an Indigenous language.

Nevertheless, 1,645 (-4.7%) fewer First Nations people could speak an Indigenous language in Quebec than in 2016.

Despite these declines, there is evidence of language revitalization taking place among First Nations youth in Quebec. In 2021, almost 4 in 10 First Nations children aged 14 and younger (39.4%) could speak an Indigenous language, just under three times higher than First Nations adults aged 65 and older (13.4%). This was also the highest share among First Nations children in Canada and three times higher than the share among First Nations children in Canada overall (13.2%).

Indigenous languages across Canada

Just over 1 in 10 First Nations people in Quebec (10.6%, or 3,555 people) learned an Indigenous language as their second language. This was the lowest share nationally, but up 355 speakers (+11.1%) from 2016.

Just over half (50.8%) of First Nations people who could speak an Indigenous language in Quebec spoke a Cree language. The Innu (Montagnais) and Naskapi languages saw the largest numeric decline among Indigenous languages in Quebec, declining by 1,095 (-11.9%) from 2016 to 2021. Atikamekw (+55 to 6,545 speakers) was the lone language in Quebec with more speakers than five years earlier.

Table 4

Atikamekw is the only Indigenous language to grow in Quebec among First Nations people from 2016 to 2021

Selected Indigenous languages	Quebec	
	2021 number	Change from 2016 percent
Cree languages	17,070	-0.6
Innu (Montagnais)	7,600	-10.3
Atikamekw	6,545	0.8
Anicinabemowin (Algonquin)	1,640	-23.2
Naskapi	530	-29.3
Mi'kmaq	320	-1.5
Iroquoian languages ¹	185	-9.8

1. Language primarily associated with incompletely enumerated reserves and settlements.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016 and 2021.

Signs of language retention and revitalization of Mi'kmaq language in Atlantic Canada

Approximately 10,875 First Nations people in Atlantic Canada reported that they could speak an Indigenous language well enough to conduct a conversation in 2021, up 1.9% (+200 speakers) from 2016. Newfoundland and Labrador reported the lone drop in First Nations people who could speak an Indigenous language (-17.7%, or -390 speakers) in Atlantic Canada, while New Brunswick reported the largest increase (+14.1%, or +405 speakers).

In 2021, almost one-third of First Nations people who could speak an Indigenous language in Atlantic Canada (31.2% or 3,395 people) had learned the language as a second language, up 8.0 percentage points (+915 speakers) from 2016, when 23.2% of First Nations Indigenous language speakers had learned the language as a second language.

Two-thirds (66.7%) of First Nations people in Prince Edward Island learned an Indigenous language as their second language, the highest rate in Atlantic Canada. By comparison, one-third of First Nations people in New Brunswick (34.7%) and Nova Scotia (33.6%) learned an Indigenous language as their second language. First Nations people in Newfoundland and Labrador (15.1%) were the least likely to learn an Indigenous language as a second language in Atlantic Canada.

There is evidence of language revitalization and the transmission of language across generations, with a higher share of First Nations children aged 14 and younger (14.0%) being able to speak an Indigenous language than adults aged 65 and older (12.3%). This contrasts with the average across Canada, where First Nations people aged 65 and older (26.4%) were twice as likely to speak an Indigenous language as children aged 14 and younger (13.2%).

Transmission of language seemed to be strongest in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and Labrador, which had the largest relative share of children learning an Indigenous language, while trends in New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island mirrored those of First Nations people across Canada overall.

Indigenous languages across Canada

Mi'kmaq was the most spoken Indigenous language among First Nations people in Atlantic Canada, with 8,195 speakers in 2021, up 5.9% from 2016.

There were 1,715 First Nations people who could speak Innu (Montagnais) and Naskapi languages in 2021, a decrease of 465 speakers (-21.3%) from 2016. While the Wolastoqewi language was almost exclusively spoken by First Nations people in New Brunswick, it rose by 45 (+6.3%) to 755 speakers.

Table 5
More First Nations people can speak Mi'kmaq and Wolastoqewi than in 2016, while fewer can speak Innu-Naskapi

Selected Indigenous Languages	Atlantic Canada		Newfoundland and Labrador		Prince Edward Island		Nova Scotia		New Brunswick	
	Change from		Change from		Change from		Change from		Change from	
	2021	2016	2021	2016	2021	2016	2021	2016	2021	2016
	number	percent	number	percent	number	percent	number	percent	number	percent
Mi'kmaq	8,195	5.9	65	30.0	115	64.3	5,505	1.1	2,505	16.0
Innu (Montagnais) and Naskapi languages	1,715	-21.3	1,700	-22.0	0	...	0	...	0	...
Wolastoqewi (Malecite)	755	6.3	0	...	0	...	10	...	740	5.0

... not applicable

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016 and 2021.

First Nations people in the Northwest Territories are the most likely to speak Indigenous languages nationally despite declines in the number of speakers

Just over one-quarter of the 19,430 First Nations people living in the territories in 2021 (25.5%, or 4,945 people) could speak an Indigenous language, down 23.4%, or 1,510 fewer speakers, compared with five years earlier. This was the largest proportional decline nationally.

First Nations people in the Northwest Territories remained the most likely to speak an Indigenous language—over one-third (34.3%, or 4,230 speakers) reported speaking an Indigenous language. A smaller share of First Nations people (9.6%, or 665 speakers) reported speaking an Indigenous language in Yukon. In Nunavut, 50 First Nations people could speak an Indigenous language, of whom 40 could speak the Inuit language Inuktitut.

The decline in First Nations people who could speak an Indigenous language in the territories is partially attributable to an aging population. In 2021, 71.4% of First Nations people aged 65 and older in the Northwest Territories and 24.5% of their counterparts in Yukon could speak an Indigenous language. By comparison, 15.8% of First Nations children aged 14 and younger in the Northwest Territories could speak an Indigenous language, while in Yukon, 4.6% could do so.

In the Northwest Territories, 940 First Nations people reported being able to speak an Indigenous language but reported a non-Indigenous language as their mother tongue, making up 22.2% of First Nations people who could speak an Indigenous language in the Northwest Territories in 2021. In Yukon, half of First Nations people who reported they could speak an Indigenous language (49.6%, or 330 speakers) learned it as a second language.

Tlicho (Dogrib) (1,865 speakers) was the most spoken Indigenous language among First Nations people in the territories, with 95.9% of those speaking the language living in the Northwest Territories. This was followed by Slavey-Hare languages (1,695 speakers), with 78.3% of those speaking these languages living in the Northwest Territories.

Indigenous languages across Canada

Table 6
Fewer First Nations people in the territories speak an Indigenous language than in 2016

Selected Indigenous Languages	Territories (includes Nunavut)		Northwest Territories		Yukon	
	Change from 2016		Change from 2016		Change from 2016	
	2021	percent	2021	percent	2021	percent
Tlicho (Dogrib)	1,865	-16.4	1,865	-16.4	0	...
Slavey-Hare languages	1,695	-26.1	1,675	-26.4	20	...
Dene	510	-12.1	500	-11.5	10	...
Tutchone languages	225	-40.8	0	...	225	-40.8
Gwich'in	205	-33.9	135	-40.0	75	-16.7
Kaska (Nahani)	195	-37.1	0	...	195	-37.1
Cree languages	130	-3.7	105	-12.5	25	...
Tlingit	90	-51.4	0	...	90	-51.4

... not applicable

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016 and 2021.

Inuit Nunangat is home to the vast majority of all Inuktitut language speakers

Inuit Nunangat, the homeland of Inuit in Canada, comprises four regions: Nunatsiavut (Labrador), Nunavik (northern Quebec), Nunavut and the Inuvialuit Settlement Region (Northwest Territories). It is home to over two-thirds (69.0%) of the total Inuit population and the vast majority (94.3%) of all Inuit Inuktitut language speakers. Inuktitut, meaning “the Inuit language,” is a term that is inclusive of all Inuit language dialects, such as Inuktitut, Inuinnaqtun and Inuvialuktun.

The most spoken Inuktitut language is Inuktitut, with 39,620 Inuit reporting they speak Inuktitut well enough to conduct a conversation. Inuktitut speakers represented the majority of Inuktitut speakers in all Inuit Nunangat regions, except the Inuvialuit Settlement Region.

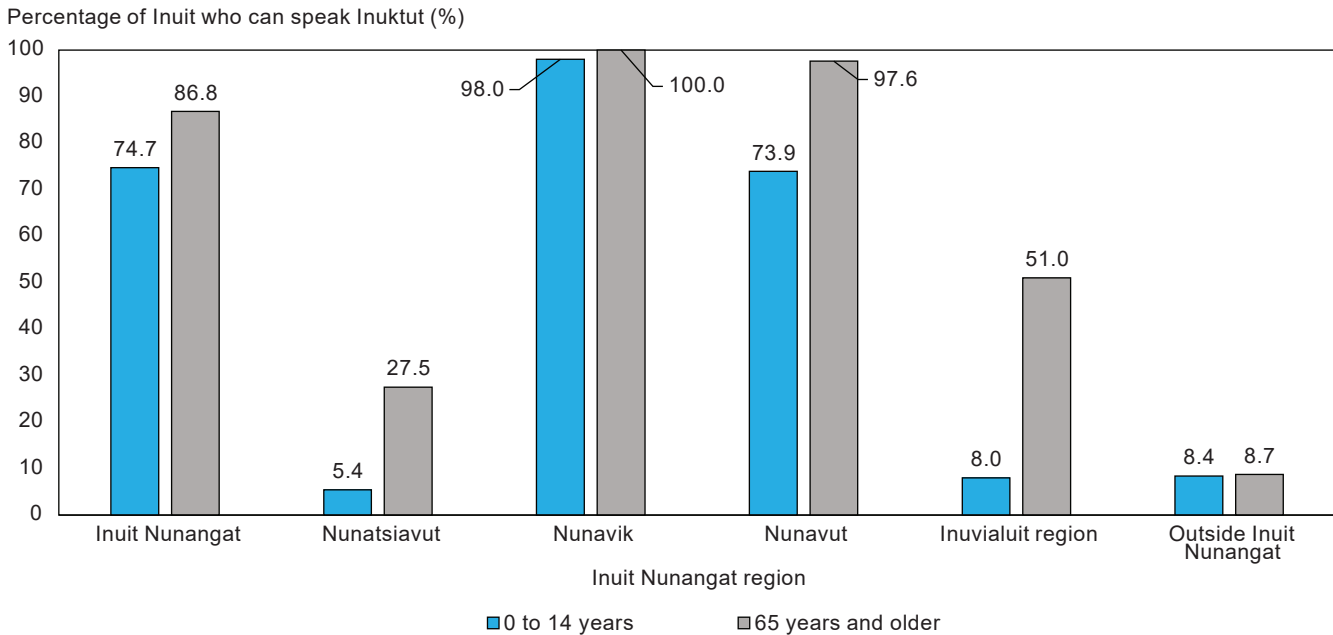
In 2021, 740 Inuit reported speaking Inuinnaqtun, with 68.2% in Nunavut and 23.6% in the Inuvialuit Settlement Region. Inuvialuktun was reported by 330 Inuit, of whom 83.3% were in the Inuvialuit Settlement Region. Several hundred Inuit also reported speaking other Indigenous languages, such as Innu (250), Cree languages (130) and Gwich'in (30).

Overall, 41,005 Inuit reported speaking an Indigenous language in 2021, down 825 speakers (-2.0%) from 2016. This decline was not uniform across Inuit Nunangat. The largest numerical decrease occurred in Nunavut (-1,795 speakers, or -6.7%), while the largest proportional declines occurred in the Inuvialuit Settlement Region (-28.6%, or -200 speakers) and Nunatsiavut (-21.4%, or -105 speakers).

Conversely, the number of speakers increased in Nunavik (+715 speakers, or +6.1%) and outside Inuit Nunangat (+570 speakers, or +27.5%). Declines were also not uniform across languages, with a small increase in the number of Inuit reporting speaking Inuktitut (+0.4%, or +145 speakers) and large declines in the endangered Inuit languages of Inuvialuktun (-45.0%, or -270 speakers) and Inuinnaqtun (-43.5%, or -570 speakers).

Despite these declines, there are signs of language transmission across the generations. For example, in Nunavik, 97.6% of children could speak Inuktitut.

Chart 4
The share of Inuit children who speak Inuktitut varies across the Inuit regions



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

More Métis are speaking Michif and Ojibway languages, but fewer Métis can speak an Indigenous language overall

Approximately 8,315 Métis reported being able to speak an Indigenous language in 2021, accounting for 1.3% of those who identified as Métis. The share of Métis who could speak an Indigenous language declined by 14.0% from 9,670 speakers in 2016, with most of the losses occurring in the Prairie provinces (-1,600, or -20.3%). In Saskatchewan, 945 fewer Métis spoke an Indigenous language, accounting for the largest share of the net decline in Métis Indigenous language speakers. Two languages were primarily affected, Cree languages (-1,300, or -21.8%) and Dene (-515, or -33.1%).

Michif is a uniquely Métis language that originated as a combination of Cree, Ojibway and French and borrows from English and other Indigenous languages. Several dialects of Michif exist and differ across the Métis homeland. In 2021, 1,485 Métis reported being able to have a conversation in Michif, up 460, or 44.9%, from 2016. There were 360 speakers who had Michif as a mother tongue; thus, three-quarters (75.8%) of Métis Michif speakers learned Michif as a second language, evidence that language revitalization is taking place. Métis Michif speakers were almost exclusively found in Ontario and Western Canada (97.3%), with most (76.1%) living in the Prairie provinces. Almost half (45.5%) of all Métis Michif speakers lived in Saskatchewan.

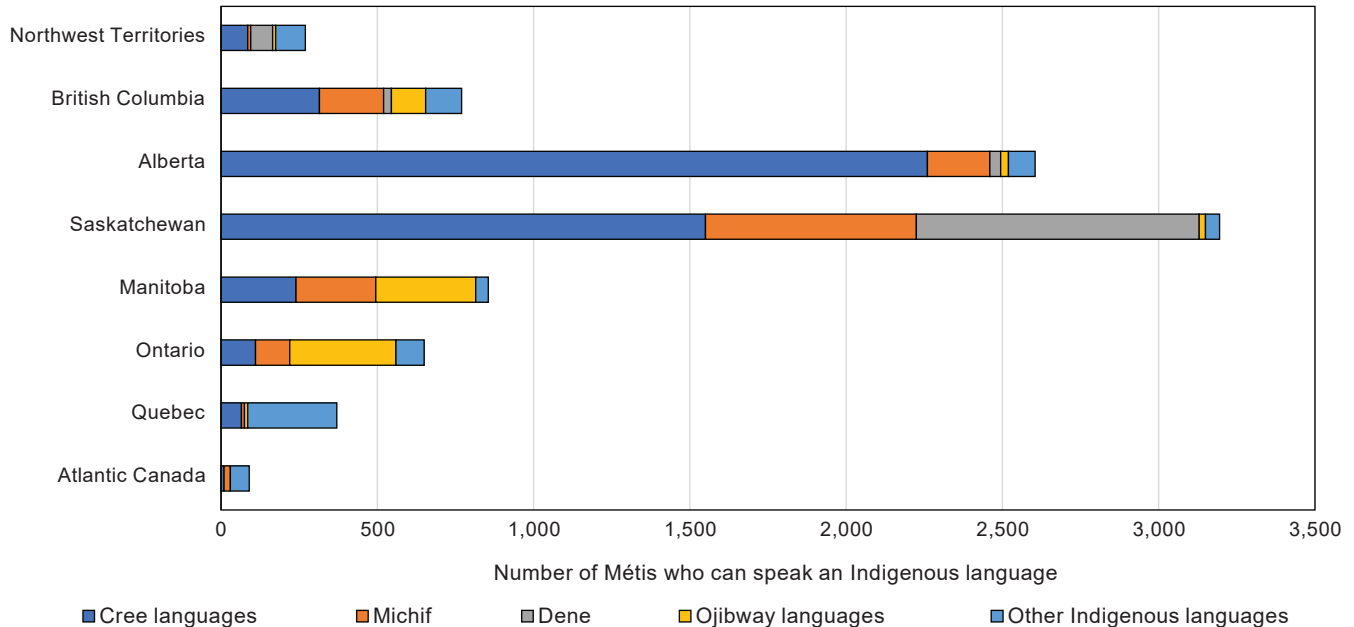
Cree languages were the most spoken languages among Métis (4,650 speakers). Nevertheless, this represented a decline from 2016 (-1,300 speakers, or -21.8%). Just under half (45.4%) of Métis Cree speakers had a non-Indigenous language as a mother tongue, up from 41.2% in 2016, showing a significant second-language acquisition of Cree among Métis. Almost half of Métis speakers of Cree languages were found in Alberta (48.6%, or 2,260 speakers), while one-third (33.3%, or 1,550) lived in Saskatchewan.

Dene was the third most spoken language among Métis, with 1,040 speakers, down 33.1% from 2016. A large majority (87.0%) of Métis Dene speakers lived in Saskatchewan. Compared with Michif and Cree languages, relatively few Dene speakers were second-language learners, with 165, or 15.9%, reporting a non-Indigenous language as their mother tongue.

Indigenous languages across Canada

Ojibway languages were the fourth most spoken languages among Métis, with 825 speakers in 2021, up 20.4% from 2016. Métis Ojibway language speakers were primarily found in Ontario (340, or 41.2%) and Manitoba (320, or 38.8%). All other Indigenous languages were spoken by fewer than 100 Métis.

Chart 5
Saskatchewan and Alberta have the highest number of Métis who can speak an Indigenous language



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Looking forward

By 2021, most Indigenous languages had experienced declines in the proportion and number of speakers. This was often because of an aging population of Indigenous language mother tongue speakers. This held true for First Nations people, Métis and Inuit. However, there are signs of a revitalization for some languages, with evidence that some Indigenous languages have high rates of transmission across generations. Some languages have experienced large increases over the past five years, largely because of second-language acquisition.

In 2024, data from the Indigenous Peoples Survey will be made available. This dataset will include additional data on those with some knowledge of Indigenous languages but who have less than a conversational ability. Further, it will include information on exposure to Indigenous languages, how Indigenous languages are learned and self-rated importance of Indigenous languages. These data will contribute to a better picture of the state of Indigenous languages and allow for a deeper understanding of how Indigenous languages are learned.

Additional information

Additional analysis on First Nations people, Métis and Inuit can be found in the *Daily* article "[Indigenous population continues to grow and is much younger than the non-Indigenous population, although the pace of growth has slowed](#)" and in the *Census in Brief* articles "[Membership in a Métis organization or Settlement: Findings from the 2021 Census of Population](#)" and "[Housing conditions among First Nations people, Métis and Inuit in Canada from the 2021 Census](#)," Catalogue no. 98-200-X.

A graphic on showing relative population size of Indigenous languages speakers among the Indigenous population in 2021 and percent change in population of speakers since 2016 can be found in the infographic titled "[Indigenous languages in Canada, 2021](#)".

Additional information on First Nations people, Métis and Inuit can be found in the [Data tables, 2021 Census of Population](#); the [Census Profile, 2021 Census of Population](#), Catalogue no. 98-316-X; and the [Focus on Geography Series, 2021 Census of Population](#), Catalogue no. 98-404-X.

For details on the concepts, definitions and variables used in the 2021 Census of Population, please consult the [Dictionary, Census of Population, 2021](#), Catalogue no. 98-301-X.

In addition to response rates and other data quality information, the [Guide to the Census of Population, 2021](#), Catalogue no. 98-304-X, provides an overview of the various phases of the census, including content determination, sampling design, collection, data processing, data quality assessment, confidentiality guidelines and dissemination.

Acknowledgments

This report was prepared by Henry Robertson of Statistics Canada's Centre for Indigenous Statistics and Partnerships, with the assistance of other staff members in that centre and the collaboration of staff members of the Census Subject Matter Secretariat, Census Operations Division, Communications Branch, and Data Access and Dissemination Branch.

References

- Assembly of First Nations. (2019 to 2020). [A Guide to An Act Respecting Indigenous Languages: A Tool for First Nations Language Revitalization](#).
- Moseley, C. (Ed.). (2010). *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*. UNESCO. Source: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000187026>
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). [Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada](#). Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.
- United Nations. (2007). [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#).
- [Indigenous Languages Act](#). S.C. 2019, c. 23.
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (2021). [International Decade of Indigenous Languages](#).