**Social and economic inequalities are shaping the dynamics of First Nations migration**

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**KEY FACTS**

The following points apply to First Nations members as a whole, but are not necessarily representative at the community level.

- The First Nations are a heterogeneous group, in terms of the geographical distribution of their members, their diversity, and also the possession of the legal status of Registered Indian.
- The perception that reserves are being depopulated is mistaken. Reserve populations are increasing, and their net migration is positive. The Indian urban population is also increasing, because those who are acquiring the status of Indian, or who newly self-identify as such, are mainly located here.
- Registered Indian men are more inclined to migrate from urban centres to reserves than vice versa. However, women migrate more from reserves to urban centres, and at younger ages than men.
- Numbers of Indian migrations are low (for example, net migration by Registered Indians, over a five year period, represents about 3% of the total Registered Indian population). The majority of migrations are in fact cases of residential mobility between communities, and (by contrast with the non-Aboriginal population) there are few migrations between provinces or internationally.
- Propensity to migrate is highest in early adulthood (from 20 to 29 years old), and then declines with age.
- Among adult migrants, work and education are the main reasons cited for moving to live outside one’s community, according to the First Nations Regional Health Survey (2008).
- Connection with the community is a reason given for returning to one’s place of origin.
- Migration has created urban communities which constitute a bridge between tradition and modernity. These communities are the source of cultural events, collective involvement and innovative forms of solidarity.
- Migrations involving reserves are mainly by Registered Indians.
- Policies aiming to reduce socio-economic inequalities within First Nations and between First Nations and non-Aboriginals need to take account of the values of each population.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The subject of this review is the migration dynamics of the First Nations (Registered and non-registered Indians), seen in the light of inequalities of various kinds. Individuals who undertake a migration are attempting to find a balance between their current situation and the situation they would like to be in, with a view to a better life. Analysing these situations implies making decisions which lead them to opt for the type of migration likely to bring them most benefit.

The First Nations are a distinct population group in Canada. As well as being heterogeneous, they also have their own socio-demographic, cultural and political characteristics, and these lie behind some types of migration flows which are unique to Canada. The different inequalities the First Nations experience also need to be better understood, if they are to be more effectively reduced. The nature, intensity and direction of the migration flows of the First Nations (Registered and non-registered Indians) reflect these inequalities, both between their communities, and also between them and the non-Aboriginal population. The most common form of First Nations migration is residential mobility, either within the same community or within an urban centre, whereas inter-provincial and international migration is rare. The net effect of the migration among Registered Indians is mainly towards the reserves, rather than to other rural or urban areas. The quest for better living conditions and the feeling of belonging to a community are the most frequent explanations for Indians deciding to migrate. These migrations may benefit Indian communities in some cases and in others may disadvantage them.

Canada’s First Nations: two populations and two different realities

The Canadian First Nations are made up of 617 First Nations communities. The members of this Aboriginal group are North American Indians, some of whom have Registered Indian status while others do not. A Registered Indian is a person who is officially recognised by the Federal Government as Indian under the terms of the Indian Act. All Registered Indians are recorded in the Indian Register, an administrative directory held by the Canadian Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development. A non-registered Indian, also known as a “non-status” Indian, is a person who declares him or herself to be Indian but who is not officially recognised as such. Many such persons do not qualify for inclusion in the Register under the terms of the Indian Act, because they are descended from two or more successive generations of exogamous unions. Some non-registered Indians would qualify to be included in the Register, but are not because they have not applied for registration.

Majority of First Nations people reside west of Quebec

Within the First Nations, there are 637,660 Registered Indians (74.9%) and 213,900 non-registered Indians (25.1%). According to the 2011 Census, about one fifth of Registered Indians are resident in Ontario (19.7%) and over four out of ten in the Prairies provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta (46.6%). Just less than one Registered Indian in six resides in British Columbia (17.6%). The majority of non-status Indians are resident in Ontario (35.3%), Quebec (13.9%), British Columbia (19.9%) and the Atlantic Provinces (12.6%).

Half of Registered Indians live in a reserve, but non-registered Indians are more urbanised

Half of Registered Indians live in a reserve. Three quarters of non-registered Indians live in urban areas, especially in CMAs, while a minority of less than 25% lives in rural areas, according to the 2006
Census. Inequalities between Registered and non-registered Indians vary with geographical location. Although the former have certain rights and privileges (in most cases linked to residence in a reserve), half of them live in these reserves, which are not always close to urban areas. But it is in urban areas that many services are available. By contrast, non-registered Indians do not have the same rights and privileges, but three quarters of them reside in large or small urban centres. Registered Indians living outside reserves, even without the privileges attached to residence there, are on average better off than registered Indians living in reserves.

**Residential mobility or long distance migration?**

A “migrant”, for the purposes of measuring migration, is defined as a person who has changed community or region. Those who have changed home within the same community or place of residence are defined as “persons who have moved house” and count towards measuring residential mobility. Migration is generally measured over a five year observation period, and residential mobility over a one year period.

Residential mobility within the same community or place of residence generally represents more than half of changes of residence among the First Nations, with the exception of rural areas. The proportion of the non-Aboriginal Canadian population which is recorded as having changed region of residence (i.e. having migrated) was 16.5% according to the 2001 Census. The proportion was 18.8% for Registered Indians and 23.7% for non-registered Indians. So the First Nations, and in particular non-registered Indians, make more changes of area of residence than non-Aboriginal Canadians. Inter-province and international migrations are, however, rare. The multiplicity of migration movements among members of the First Nations, which are often linked to cultural attachment, means that the migration profile of the First Nations is different from that of non-Aboriginal Canadians.

**To migrate, or not to migrate?**

Migration is moving from one place to another. It also means making a transition to a new life. For the First Nations, migration goes to the heart of identity. For some communities, migration is a stage in the life cycle, an experience which is enriching on both the personal level (relating to marriage, family, friendship networks, and the discovery of a different way of life) and professionally (education, employment, income). The knowledge and experience of the migrant may later be of benefit to the community of origin as a whole. For these reasons, migration is encouraged in some communities. For others, leaving represents a risk of acculturation or even assimilation. Older people may have a disapproving view of non-Aboriginal society, whose values and workings they see as a potential threat to aboriginal traditions. Migration by First Nations to towns and cities has given rise to urban communities which have become a bridge between tradition and modernity and which are the source of cultural events, collective involvement, and innovative forms of solidarity.

**The myth of depopulation of the reserves**

The perception that reserves are becoming depopulated is mistaken. Reserve populations are rising, and their net migration is positive. The urban Indian population is also increasing, mainly because those who are acquiring Indian status, or who are self-identifying as Indian for the first time, are mainly urban residents.
Differences between men and women in migration destinations and motivations

Among First Nations, and in particular among Registered Indians, men are more likely to migrate from urban centres to reserves. Such movements may be explained by having had a number of disappointing urban experiences (involving precarious housing and employment, low incomes, discrimination and cultural value conflicts). However the opposite trend is seen for women, who make more journeys, at younger ages than men, and mainly towards urban centres. Family-centered motivations are the most cited by Registered Indian women. In fact, age at marriage, age of entry into the labour market or age of becoming a single parent, which are all earlier for women than for men, partly explain this. Better access to educational and health services is also likely to be a reason for young single mothers to leave their communities. Single parent families are more mobile than married couples, and are also more inclined to leave their communities. Return to the place of origin is often motivated by the link with the community there.

Inequality and difference

Disparities in the proportions of those who have college or university diplomas and degrees still exist, and are even growing wider, between First Nations and non-Aboriginal Canadians. Compared with non-Aboriginal Canadians aged 25 to 35, 9 out of 10 of whom have a post-secondary diploma, only 5 out of 10 Registered Indians aged 25 to 35 and 7 out of 10 non-registered Indians have such a qualification. The lowest proportions of diploma-holders are found on reserves among Registered Indians.

Disparities in salaries for the same job also continue to exist between First Nations and non-Aboriginals, even in urban centres. First Nations are more likely to be unemployed or to have lower skilled, part-time, or low-paid jobs.

Access to hospitals and doctors is not the same for all First Nations members. Communities which are located nearer to large urban centres have access to a wider range of health services.

Implications for the future

This is a complex area of research in which the lack of precise data and of regular surveys which are comparable over time remains an obstacle to better understanding. However, we can say that the appearance of a population, which in the case of the First Nations is made up of many different facets, is always altered by the migration of its members. Migration flows, however large or small, impact on all the groups of individuals involved. Different levels of government listen to the voices of the First Nations, and are engaged in sustained efforts to reduce the socio-economic inequalities between them and the non-Aboriginal population, through large-scale programmes of education, employment, income support and health, while respecting the collective values of each of these groups. This is a major challenge which has to be met while at the same time ensuring that new divisions are not created.