

# Who is counted? Ethno-racial and indigenous identities in the Census of Canada, 1871-2021

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## Abstract

Finding data on race, racialized populations, and anti-racism in Canada can be a complex process when conducting research. One source of data is the Census of Canada which has been collecting socio-demographic data since 1871. However, the collection of racial, ethnic, or Indigenous data has changed throughout the years and from Census to Census. In response to the need for more support in finding ethno-racial and Indigenous data, the Ontario Council of University Libraries' Ontario Data Community has created an online guide to provide guidance, in part, about the terminology used for Indigenous and racialized identities over time in the Census. In this article, the modifications to how ethno-racial origin questions have been asked, and the ongoing changes to sociocultural perceptions impacting the Census are reviewed.

## Keywords

Canada, Census, data, ethnicity, Indigenous, race, racialization

## Introduction

A common question that a data librarian or library professional at a university in Canada will receive from a researcher is 'where is the data on race?' or 'where is the data about Indigenous peoples?' The answer will often end up being a complex explanation about the history of the Canadian Census and its transformation overtime. Unlike the United States Census, the Canadian Census has not always asked respondents about racial identity but instead asked about ethnicity, origin, or country of birth.

In the summer of 2020, a working group of data librarians and professionals from the Ontario Council of University Libraries' Ontario Data Community volunteered to form a working group to examine the context of Indigenous and racialized data over time in the Census and other data sources in Canada. Their goal was to create an [online research guide](#)<sup>4</sup> that could be used by information professionals and researchers who are seeking out data about Indigenous and racialized people or groups. The research guide addresses the following:

- a) Provides a curated list of datasets that include ethnicity and race variables which can be used to facilitate research on racialized people or groups in Canada;
- b) Describes how has the terminology about Indigenous and racialized groups or identities has changed in the Census of Population since 1871;
- c) Describes how to use Census terminology to help find data about racialized people or groups outside of the Census;

- d) Describes how to find contemporary and historical data, including Census data, that contains data about racialized peoples or groups.

In this article, the authors will focus on the Census of Canada and the modifications to how ethno-racial origin questions were asked. These questions reflect the ongoing perception of sociocultural attitudes, from rigid colonial thought to more recent ideas of diversity and inclusion. But even in the 2021 Census of Canada, a critical lens needs to be applied, as there are still potential opportunities to improve how societies across Canada are represented in the official data.

### **A note on terminology**

Due to the historical nature of the data sources referred to in this article, terminology may include language that is problematic and/or offensive to contemporary users. Specifically, vocabulary used to refer to racial, Indigenous, ethnic, religious, and cultural groups, is specific to the time period when the data was collected and does not reflect the attitudes and viewpoints of contemporary society.

### **History of the Census of Canada**

The history and present of Canada is rooted in its colonial past. Canada is a constitutional hereditary monarchy that is a federation of ten provinces and three territories. The head of state is Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom and Canada is part of the Commonwealth of Nations, formerly known as the British Empire. Some aspects of the country's affairs, such as the economy and Indigenous relations, are centrally administered through the federal government which is located in the capital Ottawa, Ontario. One of the agencies of the federal government in Canada is its national statistical agency Statistics Canada (formerly the Bureau of Dominion Statistics until 1971) which is responsible for the Census. First conducted in 1871, the Census of Canada provides a snapshot of the people living in Canada, collecting socioeconomic data to help inform public policy, decide parliamentary representation, and direct funding to resources across the country. Initially run every ten years, the quinquennial Census was introduced in 1956. Throughout its history, the Census has continued to evolve and change reflecting Canada's political and social transformations.

### **Race and ethnicity historically in the Census of Canada**

The origins of the Census of Canada are tied directly to colonialism. The first Census in North America was conducted in 1666 in New France, now Quebec to identify who was living in its colonial territory claims. Following British expansion after they annexed New France in 1760, Census activity was limited to individual British North American colonies. The 1867 British North America Act (Constitution Act) created Canada by uniting the provinces of Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. The Act also provided that a Census of Canada should be conducted every ten years starting in 1871 and new provinces and territories joined the confederation over time. The population at the time in 1871 was about 3.6 million and by 1911 the population had doubled to over 7.2 million, mostly through immigration of European settlers (Urquhart, 1993). The Census evolved to monitor the status of these new settlers but at the same time ignored and overlooked the Indigenous and racialized populations. The embedded racist

attitudes of the colonial administration perpetuated the hegemony of erasure and assimilation of those marginalized.

Currently, Statistics Canada (2015) defines ethnic origin as ‘the ethnic or cultural origins of the person’s ancestors... an ancestor is usually more distant than a grandparent.’ But from 1871 to 1891, the term ‘place of origin’ was used to indicate where a respondent was born and what their race was. In 1901, the term ‘racial origin’ was introduced and remained in use until 1941. Unlike the United States Census which continued to use ‘racial origin’ after 1941, the Census of Canada removed any reference to ‘race’ and used ‘ethnic origin’ in 1946 or ‘origin’ in 1951 to define a respondent’s race. In the decades to follow there was a shift away from the term race and in 1961, 1971, and 1981 ‘ethnic or cultural group’ was used in the Census.

A problem for researchers in this period of the Census is the lack of distinction between different ethnic, racial, and cultural groups recorded. Some racial groups would self-identify through their country of origin, unable to record their actual race. As such:

“when asked about their ethnic origins for the 1981 Census, Jamaican-descended respondents reported that they were British, while those of Haitian descent identified as French. Some Indians (from India) identified as “status Indian”—a category intended to enumerate the Aboriginal population—because they believed the question inquired about their ethnic origin and immigration status” (Thompson, 2020).

In 1986, Statistics Canada introduced changes to the Census that would help address the issue of a respondent being able to properly self-identify their ethnic or racial origin. Respondents were now able to enter multiple ethnic or cultural groups in addition to stating which country(ies) they were a citizen of. The 1986 Census is also the first time that a question about Indigenous identity was asked as separate from a racial or ethnic origin question (this will be discussed further in the section on Indigenous Representation in the Census). For example, the following was asked in the 1986 Census asked:

“to which ethnic or cultural group(s) do you or did your ancestors belong? Mark or specify as many as possible. Groups include: French, English, Irish, Scottish, German, Italian, Ukrainian, Dutch, Chinese, Jewish, Polish, Black, Inuit, North American Indian, Métis. Other groups were written in by the individual and/or Census taker.” (Statistics Canada, 1990).

Further changes were to come in the 1990s that would attempt to distinguish more specific ethno-racial data in the Census.

### **Visible minority in the Census of Canada**

Visible minority identity came about as a result of “close to 200 local, regional and national ethnic groups were contacted and asked to specify their data needs... most agreed that data on visible minorities are needed, but felt that a race question could be sensitive and controversial, even for visible minority groups” (Statistics Canada, 1990). Introduced in 1996, the visible minority question allows a respondent to self-identify as such based in the Employment Equity Act and is defined as:

“persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour”.  
The visible minority population consists mainly of the following groups: South Asian, Chinese,

Black, Filipino, Latin American, Arab, Southeast Asian, West Asian, Korean and Japanese” (Statistics Canada, 2021).

Modern versions of the Census of Canada do not include Indigenous people within the visible minority classification.

Recently some researchers have begun to refer to the Census classification of visible minorities as racialized peoples in order to better identify racialized groups in the data. Accordingly, some organizations in Canada have also responded to the needs to support racialized peoples. The Ontario Human Rights Commission defines racialized as “people from marginalized creed groups including ethnic origin, colour, ancestry, place of origin and citizenship... (and) is a generalized term to refer to people who are not Indigenous or White” and as such it recognizes “...the unique specific historical experiences of Indigenous peoples and considered separately from those of other racialized people” (2019). The Ontario Human Rights Commission elaborates that racialized includes people who identify with the Statistics Canada categories of South Asian, Chinese, Black, Filipino, Latin American, Arab, Southeast Asian, West Asian, Korean, Japanese, or more than one of these categories.” So, in this instance, racialized is not race like that in the United States Census, but based on ethnic categories from Statistics Canada. Researchers trying to compare race and ethnicity between Canada and the United States often encounter difficulty as the ethno-racial data is collected differently in the two countries. It is worth noting that there is no international standard on how each countries’ Census questions are asked and categorized. Often, international data comparison requires what is referred to as harmonization whereby data is organized into similar categories for analysis. As Indigenous identity is not a visible minority category in the Census of Canada, it is important to elaborate on the history of how Indigenous peoples have been represented in the Census.

## **Indigenous representation in the Census of Canada**

### **Indian Act**

It is important to recognize that the Census of Canada’s categories for Indigenous peoples is closely tied to the colonial legislation that was created in the past. The 1876 Indian Act was introduced to give the federal government wide sweeping powers over Indigenous peoples in Canada. It attempted to generalize a varied population of peoples, defining them by their “Indian Status” and assimilating them into non-Indigenous society. “Indian Status” was defined as “any male person of Indian blood reputed to belong to a particular band”, as well as “any child of such person” and to “any woman who is or was lawfully married to such person” (Parrott, 2020). The Indian Act also defines how an individual can lose status, for example until the 1986 amendment to the Indian Act, women with Indian status who married someone without status lost their status rights (Parrott, 2020). The Act does not directly reference non-status First Nations, Inuit or Métis, but does define the structure of Indigenous political structures, governance, cultural practices and education. The Act has been gradually amended since 1951 by removing many discriminatory sections. However, the Indian Act still exists, and throughout its history the regulations, policies, and ideologies resulting from the Indian Act have defined and restricted Indigenous peoples; and

these same policies and ideologies are reflected in the Census and define how Indigenous-identity questions are asked in the Census.

### **Indigenous identities and terminology in history of the Census**

In the 1870 Census of Manitoba and 1871 Census of Canada, and until 1891, Indigenous identity was categorized under 'origin' as 'Indian'. Between 1901 and the 1931 Census, an 'Indian' was defined as an Aboriginal person whose origin or race was 'Indian' on the mother's side, while in the 1941 and 1951 Census, this was categorized under 'Indian' or 'Eskimo' through the father's side. The 1951 Census further defined:

“for person's of mixed and Indian parentage, the origin recorded will be as follows: (a) For those living on Indian reserves, the origin will be recorded as “Native Indian”; (b) For those not on reserves the origin will be determined through the line of the father” (Dominion Bureau of Statistics, 1941).

The 1951 amendment to the Indian Act replaced the concept of First Nations ancestry with status through registration which is reflected in the 1961 Census:

“If a person reports “Native Indian” ask an additional question: Is your name on any Indian Band membership in Canada” and “Note that “Treaty Indians” should be marked “Band member”; If a person is of mixed white and Indian parentage: a) Consider those living on Indian reserves as “Indian” and determine Band status [as outlined above] b) For those not on reserves, determine the ethnic or cultural group through the line of the father” (Dominion Bureau of Statistics, 1961).

Used until 1981, 'Native Indian' was replaced in the 1986 Census by the term 'Aboriginal' with the following identifiers: First Nations, Métis and Inuit. First Nations is a term used to describe Indigenous peoples in what is now Canada, who are not Métis nor Inuit. It came into common usage in the 1970s and 1980s and has replaced the terms 'Indian', 'Native Indian' and 'Native American', although 'Indian' is still used as the legal term (Kestler, L et. al, 2009).

### **Inuit and Métis**

Prior to 1981, Inuit were enumerated as 'Indian' until the 1931 Census. From 1941 to 1971, Census enumerators entered 'Eskimo', to describe an Inuk (singular for Inuit). Inuit appeared on the Census form in 1981. Today, the Métis are one of the three recognized Indigenous peoples in Canada alongside First Nations and Inuit. However, this was not always the case in the eyes of the Government of Canada as witnessed in an 1885 House of Commons speech by Prime Minister Sir. John A. Macdonald. He stated, in reference to the Métis, “If they are Indians, they go with the tribe; if they are half-breeds, they are whites” (House of Commons Debates, 1885). The Census reflected this attitude by categorizing Métis in the 'origin' variable as 'half-breed' in the 1870 Census of Manitoba and the 1871 Census of Canada. In 1881, Métis were enumerated as either 'white' or 'Indian' and by 1901, Métis are considered 'half-breed' again, but the term was not used again until 1941. Finally, it is not until the 1981 Census that a respondent can self-identify as Métis as one of the choices in the ethnic or cultural group question. From this point forward, Métis is always included in the Census.

## The Census in the 21st century

In 2021, Statistics Canada replaced the term 'Aboriginal' with 'Indigenous' as the collective term for First Nations, Métis and Inuit (Statistics Canada, 2021b). However, it is worth noting that the terminology is not changed retroactively so when looking at historical Census data the terms Native Indian and Aboriginal remain. In recent years of the Census, some Indigenous communities have not participated in the Census. As they are considered sovereign territories, they choose not to have federal government Census enumeration and rather collect the data themselves to support their own communities. The legacy of colonialism has created mistrust between Indigenous communities and the various levels of government in Canada, especially at the federal level. 92.5% of Indigenous communities participated in Census 2016 up from 89.9% in 2011 (Grant, 2016). As such, fourteen First Nations communities did not give permission to Census 2016 enumerators (Statistics Canada, 2016). Furthermore, "many urban Indigenous people tend not to participate in the Census due to factors such as poverty and its associated lack of a fixed address, mobility between communities and historical distrust of government and colonial policies" (Yfile, 2019). These Indigenous communities that did not participate in the Census would collect demographic data themselves for their own decision making. Over time, the Census of Canada has shifted and evolved in its classifications and categories of ethno-racial and Indigenous identity as it responds to changes in the sociocultural constructs of Canada.

## Conclusion

What has become evident in working on this project of identifying Indigenous and racialized data in the Census of Canada is that there have been points in which certain groups of people have been excluded and ignored. The colonial mindset rendered those it considered not important to progress irrelevant. The terminology about ethno-racial identity over the past one hundred and fifty years in the Census of Canada has changed tremendously. In the early Censuses of the 19th century, the information collected was based on where you were born and this fixed your identity to that place. But "in the mid-19th century, science and the scientific community served to legitimize society's racist views" (Smithsonian, 2021) so between 1901 and 1941, racial identity did become a part of the Census. Consequently, the Census became an instrument to intensify the classification, segregation, and assimilation of the non-white elements of Canadian society.

There have been improvements to the Canadian Census in recent years. In addition to the greater recognition of what Indigenous peoples and visible minorities bring to Canadian society, the 2021 Census added a question about gender identity in addition to sex of the respondent. However, sexual orientation was not included as Statistics Canada still considers this a 'sensitive topic.' The federal government is often seen as a monolith slow to change, but it is at the point it appears to be going in the right direction in terms of greater inclusivity with the Census. However, it will only be evident in the next Census in 2026 if there are new measures in place to better identify racialized, Indigenous, and marginalized groups in Canada.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>4</sup> <https://learn.scholarsportal.info/featured/data-on-racialized-populations/>