

Mapping the conditions of First Nations communities

by Robin Armstrong

The majority of Registered Indians in Canada reside in approximately 900 small First Nations communities, which form a 5,000 kilometre archipelago across the Canadian landscape. Although many of these communities have much in common, they are by no means a homogeneous group. Separated by distance and differentiated by history, language and culture, individual communities often developed unique ways of life. Nearly all, however, have a substantially lower standard of living than the average Canadian community.

Comparing First Nations communities with each other reveals that living conditions in these communities vary considerably according to several factors. One of these factors is location. Regional differences in patterns of well-being — if indeed there are such patterns — may highlight some of the characteristics that are associated with these diverse living conditions. Using levels of schooling, employment rate, income and housing as indicators of well-being, this article examines the location of First Nations communities whose well-being is above average, average and below average. It then compares the living conditions of these First Nations communities with those of other Canadian communities.

Nearly one in four Registered Indians live in above average communities

In 1996, approximately 23% of the Registered Indian population lived in above average First Nations communities. They reported better incomes, higher employment rates, lower levels of crowding and generally higher levels of education than

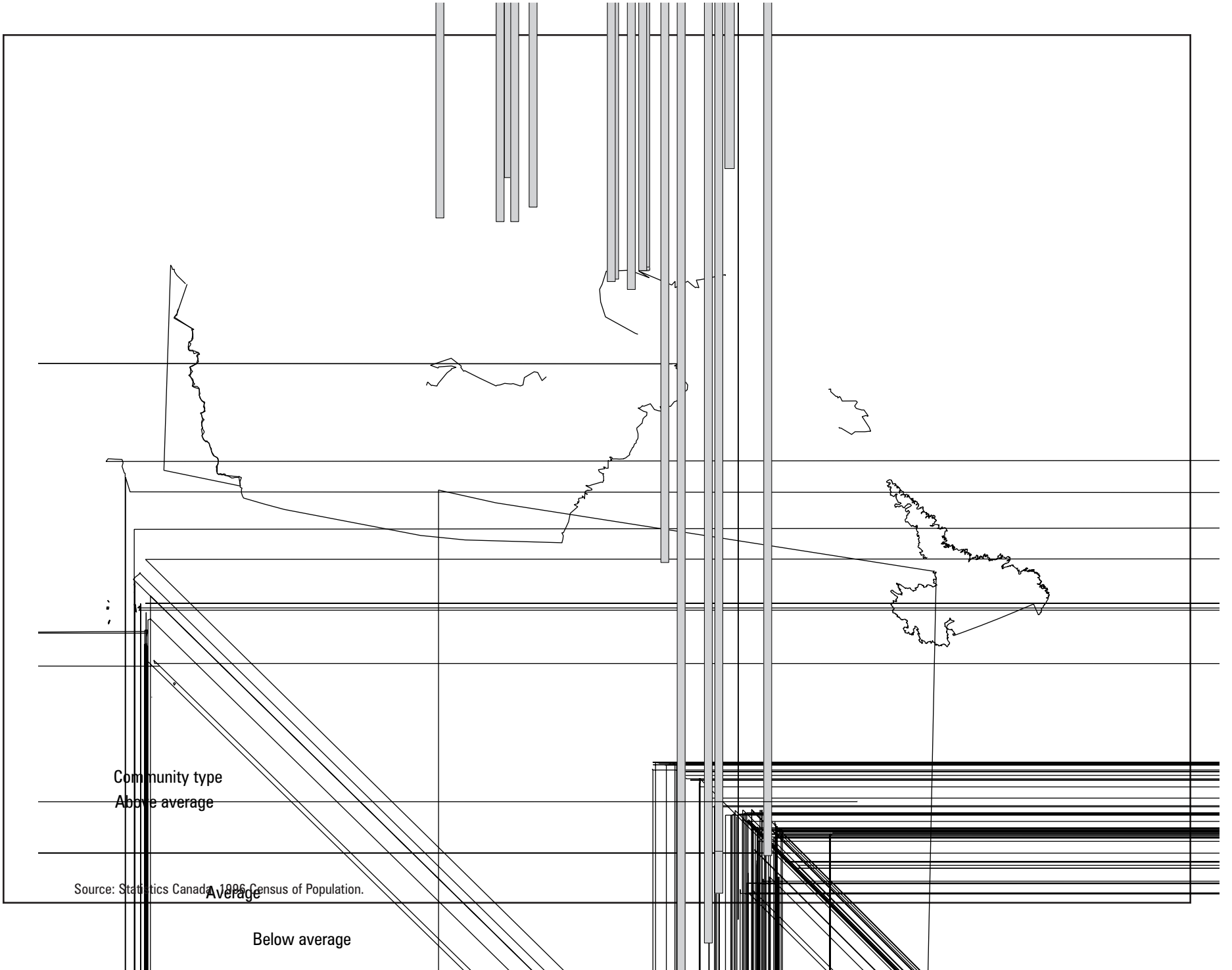
did residents in average and below average communities. Most above average communities were clustered in Quebec, mid- and southern Ontario, and British Columbia's southern and coastal regions. However, smaller pockets were present in every province, at times adjacent to First Nations communities with substantially lower standards of living.

Approximately 47% of the Registered Indian population lived in communities with average socioeconomic conditions. Compared with above average communities, low educational attainment and crowding were marginally higher while employment rates and income were considerably lower. Average communities were most prevalent in the Maritimes, southern Manitoba and southern Saskatchewan.

The third group of communities, where nearly 32% of the Registered Indian population lived, exhibited below average conditions. In these communities, high rates of crowding combined with low levels of education, employment and income. The largest concentrations of below average communities were found in mid-Quebec, north-western Ontario, northern Manitoba and Saskatchewan, and throughout Alberta.

Communities near urban centres better off than others
Geographic patterns suggest that being near urban or resource-rich areas aids development. Communities in these locations are able to pursue socioeconomic well-being by accessing resources and integrating with urban labour markets. Location, however, is neither an assured nor an only

Although it seems important, location is neither an assured nor an only path to socioeconomic well-being



Data for this study have been drawn from the 1996 Census of Population. First Nations communities are defined as census sub-divisions (CSDs) classified as reserves, settlements, Indian government districts, terres réservées or villages cris. In 1996, Statistics Canada collected data from 751 First Nations CSDs. Of these, communities with populations less than 65 were eliminated, accounting for 2.5% of the Registered Indian population of enumerated First Nations communities. This left almost 500 First Nations communities in the study population. Cluster analysis was used to identify and group communities with similar characteristics: 154 were classified as above average, 218 as average, and 124 as below average.

The following four variables are used to measure socioeconomic well-being:

Education: the percent of population aged 20 to 64 with less than grade 9 education as their highest level of schooling. High percentages indicate the extent to which a population is inadequately educated for the modern economy.

Employment: the percent of population aged 20 to 64 employed during the week prior to the census. This variable is a measure of the general health of the local wage economy as well as the paid labour force success of a population.

Income: average annual income from all sources, in 1995, for individuals with income. Income serves as a proxy for the general material well-being of a population.

Housing: mean number of persons per room. Higher values indicate more crowded housing conditions. Not counted as rooms are bathrooms, halls, vestibules and rooms used solely for business purposes.

The remaining two indicators provide further aid in interpreting well-being:

Language: indicates the percent of population that speaks an Aboriginal language at home. It is a proxy for how successfully traditional culture has been preserved. However, a low percentage does not necessarily indicate a loss of uniquely Aboriginal culture.

Youth: indicates percent of population that is under 18 years old. This, in turn, points to the fertility of the population and may, where low, indicate out-migration of population from these areas.

path to success. Some First Nations communities near major cities have below average characteristics, while others in more isolated locations show above average attributes.

Other variables also help explain why some communities are better off than others. First it appears that, in general, First Nations communities that have adopted more “mainstream” ways of doing things are more likely to have better socioeconomic conditions. Indeed, in above average communities, a substantially lower proportion of people spoke an Aboriginal language at home than in below average communities (10% versus 52%), implying that more people conversed in English or French. Above average communities were also more like mainstream society in that they had older populations and were more highly educated.

There are, however, exceptions to mainstream-adaptation models of success. In a small group of eight above average communities (seven of which are James Bay Cree), nearly 90% of the population spoke an Aboriginal language at home. High proportions of Aboriginal home language use (35% to 75%) also occurred in another six above average communities. And some of these well-off groups have very young populations (45% to 55% under 18 years), which further differentiates them from mainstream society. These examples suggest that there are several models for socioeconomic success. Perhaps characteristics that above average First Nations communities share with other Canadians are more superficial than would appear at first glance.

First Nations communities still lag behind non-Aboriginal Canada

Substantial socioeconomic disparities continue to exist between residents in First Nations communities and other Canadians. Compared with the overall Canadian population, in 1996,



More than 4 in 10 people in a typical below average First Nations community had less than a Grade 9 education

	First Nations communities		
	Above average	Average	Below average
% of Registered Indian population	23	47	32
% with less than Grade 9 ¹	15	20	44
% employed ¹	60	42	35
Number of persons per room	0.8	0.9	1.3
Average annual income	\$16,000	\$11,000	\$10,000
% speaking Aboriginal language at home	10	15	52
% under 18 years	38	43	48

1. As percentage of population aged 20 to 64.
Source: Statistics Canada, 1996 Census of Population.

on-reserve Registered Indians were more than twice as likely to have less than grade 9 schooling. In addition, their employment rates were 60% lower, and their average income was only half as much (\$25,000 versus \$12,000). Data on family and housing conditions reveal a similar pattern: First Nations families were twice as likely to be lone-parent families (26% versus 13%) and dwellings were over six times more likely to be crowded (31% versus 5%).

But averages often mask individual differences. To see how specific First Nations communities compared with the rest of the country, non-Aboriginal Canada was divided into five regions of well-being, and a new group of “best-off” Aboriginal communities was created. This best-off group, whose socioeconomic well-being was the highest among First Nations, comprised a set of 45 communities located primarily in southern Ontario and in southern and coastal British Columbia. When levels of education, employment, housing and income were compared between best-off Aboriginal communities and the five non-Aboriginal regions, the results spoke for themselves: First Nations

communities with the best socioeconomic circumstances met the standards of only the poorest regions of non-Aboriginal Canada.

Then and now

While several factors preclude making an exact comparison between 1986 and 1996, sufficient similarities in methodology exist to allow a general contrasting of the two periods. Results indicate that the distribution of First

Nations by relative levels of socioeconomic well-being has not changed significantly during the 10 years.

Geographical patterns in 1996 also resembled those 10 years before. Conditions remained mostly poor in northwestern Ontario, northern Manitoba and northern Saskatchewan; they continued to be relatively good in southern and northern Ontario, along the U.S. border, and in southern British Columbia. Meanwhile, conditions eroded somewhat in the northern and central coastal regions of British Columbia and central Alberta, while they improved in Atlantic Canada and in isolated pockets in the northern parts of provinces from British Columbia to Quebec.

Summary

The vast majority of First Nations communities have considerably lower standards of living than non-Aboriginal regions. In fact, the best-off First Nations communities compare only with the worst-off areas of non-Aboriginal Canada. But substantial variations also exist between Aboriginal communities depending on several geographic and socioeconomic factors. For example, First Nations communities appear to do better



Conditions in even the poorest non-Aboriginal regions were better than those in the best-off First Nations communities

	Best-off First Nations communities	Worst-off non-Aboriginal regions
% with less than Grade 9 ¹	12	20
% employed ¹	58	57
Number of persons per room	0.7	0.6
Average annual income	\$18,200	\$18,900
% speaking Aboriginal language at home	2	n.a.
% under 18 years	36	25

1. As percentage of population aged 20 to 64.
Source: Statistics Canada, 1996 Census of Population.

socioeconomically when near an urban centre or resource-rich area. Their situation becomes better yet when certain factors — language, age structure of population, education — reflect those of the non-Aboriginal majority. At first glance, this may suggest that adopting mainstream ways may be the model for socioeconomic success. However, the numerous exceptions to this observation imply that there are alternative paths to development, making the situation more complex than may appear at first sight.

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