

Well-being of off-reserve Aboriginal children

by Martin Turcotte and John Zhao

This article is adapted from *A Portrait of Aboriginal Children Living in Non-reserve Areas: Results from the 2001 Aboriginal Peoples Survey* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 89-597). It is available free of charge from the Statistics Canada Web site: www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/89-597-XIE/free.htm. Please note: the term “non-reserve” used in the original report was changed to “off-reserve” in this article.

According to the 2001 Census, there were about 227,000 off-reserve Aboriginal children aged 14 and under. These children accounted for 70% of all Aboriginal children aged 14 and under living in Canada. Off-reserve Aboriginal children represented 32% of the off-reserve Aboriginal population, far higher than children’s share of the non-Aboriginal population (18%).

This article describes the well-being of off-reserve Aboriginal children aged 14 and under at the beginning of the 21st century. Key factors involved in human well-being include the physical, mental, intellectual, spiritual and emotional aspects of life, as well as the land. Well-being stems from a balance and harmony between these interrelated factors. This article uses data from the 2001 Aboriginal Peoples Survey (APS) to focus on off-reserve Aboriginal children in regards to three areas — health and well-being, education¹ and learning and use of Aboriginal languages.

Parent-rated health of their children

Many Aboriginal peoples have a holistic concept of well-being in which mental, spiritual and emotional aspects of well-being are just as important as physical health. Health

CST What you should know about this study

Following the 2001 Census, Statistics Canada, in collaboration with national Aboriginal organizations, conducted the Aboriginal Peoples Survey (APS). This report examines data from the component of the survey that covers children aged 14 and under who were identified as Aboriginal by a parent¹ and who lived off-reserve.

The Aboriginal population is defined based on “identity”: 1) being North American Indian, Métis and/or Inuit, and/or 2) having registered Indian status as defined by the *Indian Act*, and/or 3) having Band or First Nations membership. This article focuses on off-reserve Aboriginal children across Canada. Unlike the 2001 Census, however, for the Northwest Territories, both on- and off-reserve children are included in this study. Aboriginal children living in a few other communities in Quebec, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and the Yukon Territory treated as reserve communities in the 2001 Census are also included in the group of off-reserve Aboriginal children in this article.

1. In the Aboriginal Peoples Survey on children, the respondent is the person most knowledgeable about the child. In the majority of cases, this person is a parent of the child (93%), but may also be a grandparent (4%) or other relative. In this article “parent” means the person most knowledgeable about the child unless otherwise specified.

and epidemiology researchers also acknowledge that it is inappropriate to assume someone is in good health merely because of the absence of illness or physical problems. A “positive” assessment of general health and overall well-being is of much greater value.

Parents rated the health of off-reserve Aboriginal children as slightly lower than that of all Canadian children. For children aged five and under, 90% of all Canadian children had very good or excellent health, compared with 83% of off-reserve Aboriginal children.² The difference

in health status was smaller for older children aged 6 to 14, where 86% of all children and 82% of off-reserve Aboriginal children had very good or excellent health.

Numerous studies have found a link between parental socio-economic background and children's health.³ According to the APS, parental education plays a crucial role in the health of off-reserve Aboriginal children. Barely three-quarters (73%) of Aboriginal children whose parent had completed elementary school or less had very good or excellent health, compared with 89% of those whose parent had completed university studies.

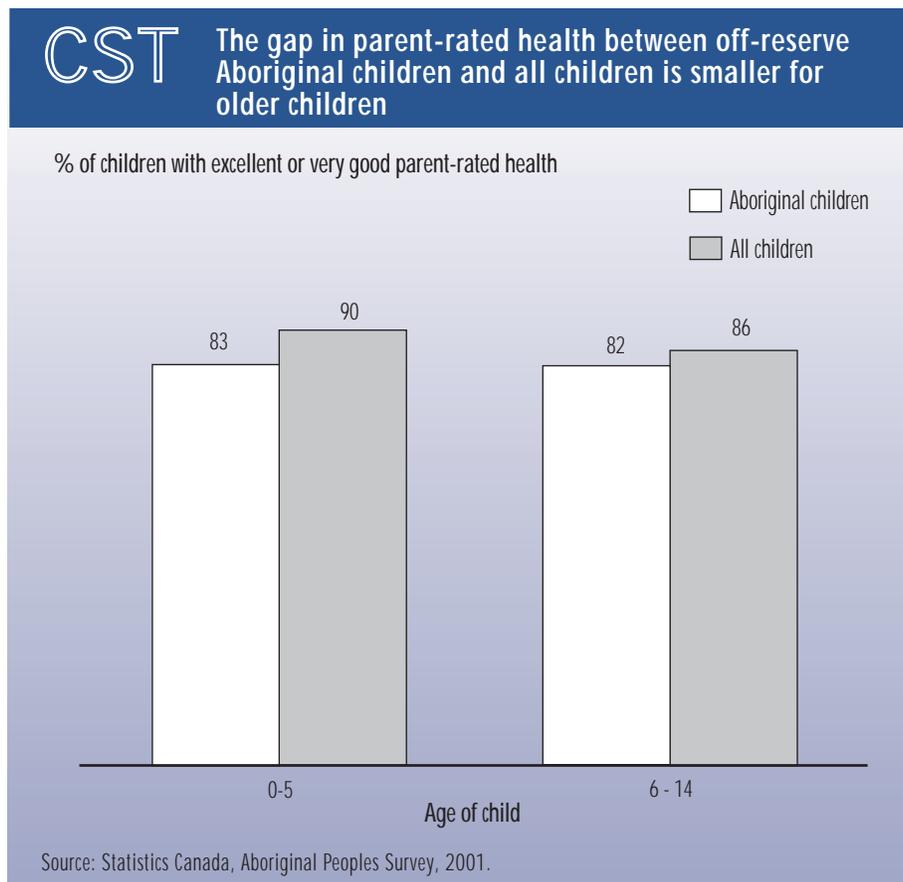
Accidental injuries

One of the most frequent causes of health problems, hospitalization and even mortality among young children is injuries sustained in situations such as falls and car or bicycle accidents. According to the APS, about 13% of off-reserve Aboriginal children had been accidentally injured in the previous year, slightly higher than 11% for all children.⁴

Like the general population, Aboriginal boys (15%) were more likely to be injured than girls (11%). Inuit children were least likely to be injured (9%) compared with 12% of off-reserve North American Indian and 15% of Métis children. This may reflect, in part, the definition of injuries used in the 2001 APS. Respondents were instructed to report only injuries serious enough to require medical attention.⁵ However, residents of the North are less likely to have access to medical attention. Because Inuit live predominantly in the North, the injury rates of Inuit children may have been underestimated.

Eating breakfast

Eating breakfast has many benefits for children, including providing energy for the morning's activities, helping them to get ready to learn, maintaining a healthy body weight



and helping kids to feel good. About 80% of off-reserve Aboriginal children aged 6 to 14 ate breakfast every day whether at home, school or at a caregiver's.

As Aboriginal children grow older, they are less likely to eat breakfast every day. About 86% of 6-year-old Aboriginal boys and 91% of girls ate breakfast every day, compared with 64% of 14-year-old Aboriginal boys and 55% of girls. Generally speaking, though, the difference between Aboriginal boys and girls was not significant.

Breast-feeding

Breast-feeding is considered by public health authorities to be the most nutritious choice for newborns. According to the 2001 APS, 67% of off-reserve Aboriginal children were breast-fed by their mothers when they were young. Breast-feeding has increased as 72% of Aboriginal children aged five and under were

breast-fed when they were young, compared with 63% of Aboriginal children aged 6 to 14. Off-reserve Aboriginal children aged three and under were less likely to have been breast-fed when young than Canadian children in general (73% versus 82%).

There is a strong relationship between a parent's education and incidence of breast-feeding of children. The incidence of breast-feeding among off-reserve Aboriginal children increases with parental education, except among Inuit children, where parental education was not related to the incidence of breast-feeding.

Birth weight

Low birth weight has a crucial impact on a child's likelihood of survival at birth and during the first year of life. Birth weight may also be a factor in a child's future health and life. For example, children who are born at

term but with low birth weights are more likely to develop diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease during adulthood.⁶ Low birth weight may have a negative impact on the development of cognitive abilities in childhood and into adulthood.⁷ According to the APS, 8% of off-reserve Aboriginal children had low birth weights, compared with 6% of all Canadian children.⁸

Learning is multi-dimensional for Aboriginal children

In Aboriginal societies, the family, Elders and the community play key roles in children's learning and education. In this context, the socialization of children includes not only the development of cognitive capacities, but also the learning of ways to behave in society. Ultimately, the child needs to develop fully "intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically" to become an "Aboriginal citizen" capable of assuming community and societal responsibilities.⁹

The APS includes information on extra-curricular activities, including time spent with Elders, helping out in school and communities, participation in art or music, or group activities such as dance, drum and youth groups. It also includes information on Aboriginal language abilities and preschool programs, especially those designed specifically for Aboriginal children. However, there is still much about learning outside school that is not captured by the APS, as its measures of education outcomes are confined to school outcomes such as repeating a grade, rather than to a wider spectrum including spiritual and emotional development.

The importance of a sound formal education is increasing. The advent of the knowledge-based economy has made jobs requiring less than a high school diploma increasingly scarce. Educational attainment among the Aboriginal population in

Canada has increased. Between 1996 and 2001, the percentage of the off-reserve Aboriginal population aged 20 to 24 who had at least completed high school increased from 48% to 52%. Yet, in 2001, a large gap remained between that group and the general Canadian population aged 20 to 24, as 74% of the latter had at least completed high school.

Preschool programs specifically designed for Aboriginal children are on the rise but still uncommon

Many authors have traced the path toward dropping out of school to a child's first years at school.¹⁰ Attendance at a quality early childhood development or preschool program often facilitates a child's cognitive and social development, especially among children from economically disadvantaged families.

According to the 2001 APS, just over half (53%) of off-reserve Aboriginal children aged 6 to 14 had attended an early childhood development program when they were younger. Younger off-reserve Aboriginal children were more likely to have attended preschool programs that were specifically designed for them. For example, 16% of six-year-old off-reserve Aboriginal children had attended preschool programs specifically designed for Aboriginal children compared with only 4% of 14-year-olds. In contrast, younger off-reserve Aboriginal children were just as likely as older off-reserve Aboriginal children to have attended other preschool programs not specifically designed for the Aboriginal children.

Doing well at school is affected by many factors

In general, researchers have found that reading, or being read to (apart from as required by school), can have a positive impact on a child's education outcomes and reading skills.¹¹ Off-reserve Aboriginal children who

read or were read to more often were less likely to repeat a grade. About 26% of those children who didn't read or were never read to repeated a grade, twice the proportion of those who read or were read to just a few times a week.

Girls read or were read to more frequently than boys. Among girls aged 6 to 14, about 56% of them read, or were read to, on a daily basis, compared with 43% of boys. Conversely, only 4% of girls never read or were never read to, compared with 9% of boys.

Off-reserve Aboriginal children who participate frequently in extra-curricular activities are more likely to do very well at school

Previous research reveals a positive correlation between participation in extra-curricular activities and self-esteem, social interaction with friends and scholastic achievement.¹² However, although the APS shows a similar correlation for off-reserve Aboriginal children, it is not possible to establish a causal relationship between extra-curricular activities and academic performance.

Among off-reserve Aboriginal children aged 6 to 14, sports were most popular, with 71% of children participating at least once per week. Time spent with Elders (34%), on art and music (31%), in youth, drum and dance groups or clubs (30%) and helping out with community or school activities without pay (21%) were other popular extra-curricular activities.

The survey found significant differences in school performance¹³ between those who frequently engaged in extra-curricular activities, and those who rarely or never did so. Children who helped in the community or school without pay four or more times a week were most likely to do very well at school (64%). In contrast, only 38% did very well among those who rarely or never helped.

Most Aboriginal children get along with classmates and teachers

In general, children who have problems interacting with their classmates and their teachers are more likely than others to drop out of school and/or experience difficulties because they may be less motivated to attend school or may suffer a loss of self-confidence.¹⁴

The vast majority of Aboriginal children maintained harmonious relationships at school. Nearly all off-reserve Aboriginal children aged 6 to 14 (97%) got along fairly well, well or very well with other children. Frequent or constant problems with teachers were rare, although older children and boys were more likely to have such problems.

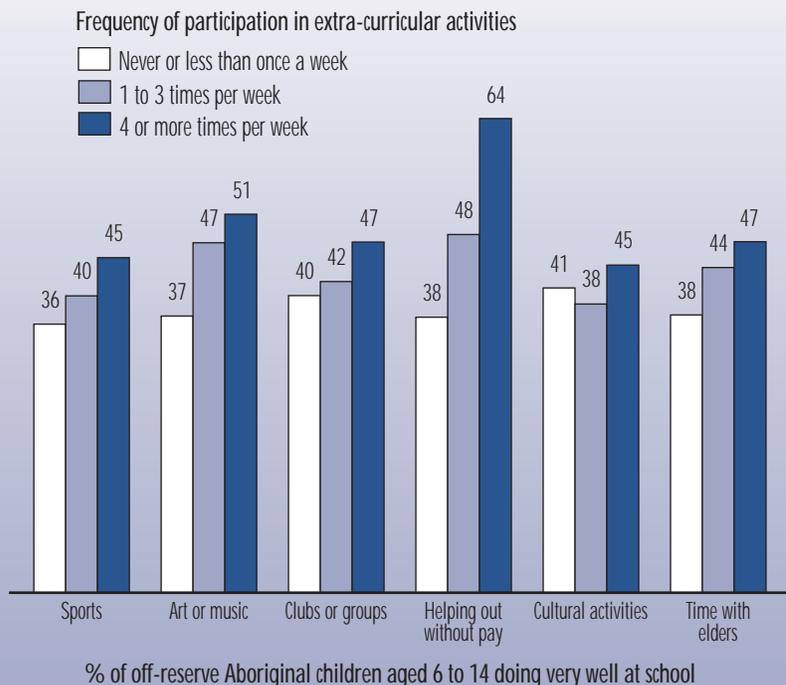
Off-reserve Aboriginal children with a highly educated parent were less likely to repeat a grade

Researchers have found a link between high parental education and high eventual educational attainment of their children.¹⁵ Many factors may explain this link. For example, parents with higher levels of education take a greater interest in their child's academic performance, encourage activities that facilitate academic success and have higher expectations of success at school for their children.

According to the APS, the higher a parent's education, the less likely their child is to ever repeat a grade. Just over one fifth of off-reserve Aboriginal children aged 6 to 14 whose parent had not completed elementary school had repeated a grade, compared with 6% of children whose parent had a bachelor's degree or more. Similarly, about 16% of children in families below the low income cut-off had repeated a grade, compared with 10% of children in families at or above the low income cut-off.

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Off-reserve Aboriginal children who frequently participate in extra-curricular activities are more likely to do very well at school



Source: Statistics Canada, Aboriginal Peoples Survey, 2001.

Most parents of off-reserve Aboriginal children believe it is important for their children to speak and understand an Aboriginal language

Language is often considered as both an instrument and an essential part of culture. In many Aboriginal societies, "the fundamental teachings are preserved in sacred stories, ceremonies and symbols," which are "the symbols of the ideas, concepts, and beliefs of a society which has an oral tradition."¹⁶ In this context, mastery by children of the language of their ancestors greatly assists in the transmission of values, beliefs and communication skills from generation to generation.

Parents of 6 in every 10 off-reserve Aboriginal children (62%) believed it was somewhat or very important for their children to speak and understand an Aboriginal language. Parents of Inuit children (89%) were much more likely than parents of off-

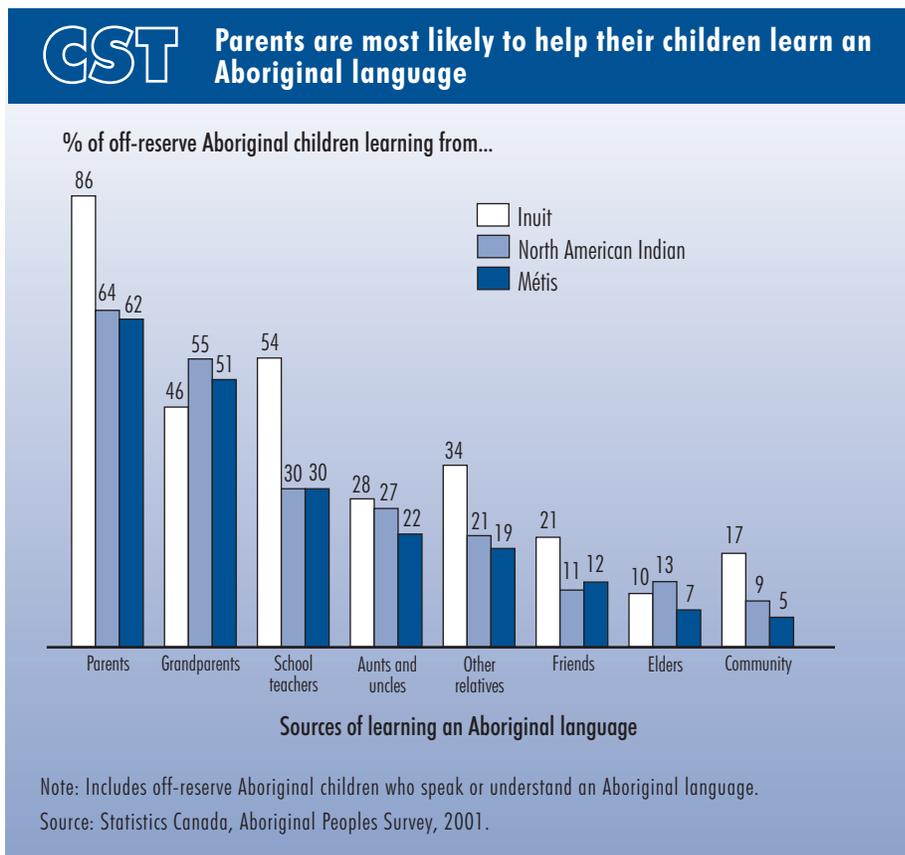
reserve North American Indian (67%) and Métis (50%) children to believe so.

There are marked differences in Aboriginal language skills between Inuit children and off-reserve North American Indian and Métis children. Among Inuit children aged 14 and under, and excluding those too young to speak, 76% could speak or understand an Aboriginal language while 25% of North American Indian children and 12% of Métis children also could. These differences may be explained by the fact that the vast majority of Inuit children live in northern remote communities. Among North American Indian children, Aboriginal languages are more likely to be spoken among those living in First Nations communities. Those living off-reserve frequently live in highly urbanized areas where Aboriginal languages are less common.

Off-reserve Aboriginal children may learn an Aboriginal language from many sources but most often from their parents. About 86% of Inuit children got help from their parents, compared with 64% of North American Indian children and 62% of Métis children.

The more sources a child can rely on to learn an Aboriginal language, the more likely they are to speak and understand it well. For example, among off-reserve Aboriginal children who speak or understand an Aboriginal language, only 15% could speak and understand an Aboriginal language very well or relatively well if they had only a single source of assistance to learn. In contrast, among those children who relied on three sources of assistance, 38% were able to speak and understand an Aboriginal language well, while 80% of those who had seven sources of assistance could speak and understand an Aboriginal language well. It is likely that children who can rely on assistance from many sources live in communities where Aboriginal languages are very common.

Parents with higher levels of education are less likely to have children who can speak or understand an Aboriginal language. About 17% of children of a postsecondary-educated parent could speak or understand an Aboriginal language, compared with 44% whose parent had not gone beyond elementary school. This difference was common to all three major Aboriginal groups. To properly determine why such a relationship between parental education and their children's speaking or understanding an Aboriginal language exists, further studies are needed to examine other factors, such as location of postsecondary institutions, location of work, effect of residential schools, marriage between Aboriginal people and other Canadians, and home languages.



Summary

The off-reserve Aboriginal population is young and growing with proportionally more children than the entire Canadian population. The health and well-being of off-reserve Aboriginal children, their education and learning and the transfer of Aboriginal languages to these children were all explored in this article.

The health and well-being of Aboriginal children will define the future of Aboriginal communities. It is hoped that this article will contribute to new ideas on how the situation of off-reserve Aboriginal children can be further improved.



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1. The 2001 APS examines school outcomes such as school performance and grade repeating. It does not explore issues such as the development of life skills or spiritual and emotional development, nor does it examine other important learning activities, which may occur in the homes and communities of Aboriginal children.
2. The results for all Canadian children are estimated using the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY), Cycle 4 (2000/2001). Comparisons between Aboriginal and all Canadian children are based on the results from the 2001 APS and the 2000/2001 NLSCY respectively unless otherwise specified.
3. Statistics Canada. 1999. "Health status of children." *Health Reports* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 82-003-XIE) 11, 3: 27-38.
4. Includes children who experienced injuries requiring the attention of a doctor, nurse, dentist or traditional healer during the 12-month period prior to the survey. Self-inflicted injuries and injuries resulting from assaults and fatal injuries are excluded. Two percent of off-reserve Aboriginal children suffered injuries from self-inflicted wounds, while 2% were assault victims.

5. In the 12 months prior to the survey, parents of 71% of Aboriginal children living in the North had obtained medical attention (including over the phone) from doctors, nurses or traditional healers for their children, compared with parents of 84% of Aboriginal children living in the rest of Canada.
6. Wadsworth, M.E.J. 1997. "Health inequalities in the life course perspective." *Social Science and Medicine* 44, 6: 859-869.
7. Jefferis, B.J.M.H., C. Power and C. Hertzman. August 10, 2002. "Birth weight, childhood socioeconomic environment, and cognitive development in the 1958 British birth cohort study." *British Medical Journal* 325: 305.
8. Low birth weight refers to less than 2,500 grams.
9. Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. 1996. *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples: Gathering Strength* vol. 3. Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada. p. 434.
10. Cairns, R.B., B.D. Cairns and H.J. Neckerman. 1989. "Early school dropout: configurations and determinants." *Child Development* 60: 1437-1452; Astone, N.M. and S.S. McLanahan. 1991. "Family structure, parental practices and high school completion." *American Sociological Review* 56: 309-320.
11. Sénéchal, M. and J.-A. LeFevre. 2002. "Parental involvement in the development of children's reading skill: A five-year longitudinal study." *Child Development* 73: 445-460; Cooks, C. and J.D. Willms. 2002. "Balancing work and family life." In J.D. Willms (ed.), *Vulnerable Children*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press and Human Resources Development Canada: 183-197.
12. Statistics Canada. *The Daily*. May 30, 2001. "National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth: Participation in activities, 1998/99."
13. Parents rated how well their child did in school, based on their knowledge of the child's school work, including report cards.
14. Cairns, Cairns and Neckerman. 1989.
15. De Broucker, P. and L. Lavallée. 1998. "Intergenerational aspects of education and literacy skills acquisition." In M. Corak (ed.), *Labour Markets, Social Institutions, and the Future of Canada's Children* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 89-553-XIB): 129-144.
16. Svenson, K.A. and C. Lafontaine. 1999. "The search for wellness." *First Nations and Inuit Regional Health Survey – National Report 1999*. Ottawa: First Nations and Inuit Health Survey National Steering Committee. p. 190.