

SIOUAN LANGUAGES



A collaborative research project between Statistics Canada
and the Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages

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A note on the text

This report is a collaborative research project between Statistics Canada and the Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages. It is intended to provide a general overview on the vitality, acquisition and use of Indigenous languages belonging to the Siouan language family. For more information on the work of OCIL see [Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages - Home](#).

Indigenous Language Families: Siouan languages

Throughout the vast plains of the midwestern United States and the prairies of Canada, languages such as Assiniboiné, Dakota, Omaha and Stoney have long been spoken. Collectively, these languages exist under the banner of Siouan languages. Today, Siouan languages can be heard in the provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta.

Within this report the following Siouan languages are presented:

- Assiniboiné
- Dakota
- Stoney
- Siouan languages, not included elsewhere (n.i.e.)

Summary language statistics are provided for these languages in table 2.

Knowledge and mother tongue

In 2021, there were 2,965 people who reported that they could speak a Siouan language well enough to conduct a conversation. The number of those who reported that a Siouan language was their mother tongue—that is, the language first learned as a child and still understood—was 1,750.

The largest group within the Siouan language family was those who spoke Dakota, with 1,530 speakers and 915 people having Dakota as their mother tongue; this was followed by Stoney (925 speakers and 545 mother tongue), and Assiniboiné (365 speakers and 215 mother tongue).

Age is a useful indicator of the degree to which languages are transmitted from one generation to the next. A language with a younger age profile typically means that younger people continue to learn and speak the language at a rate commensurate with older generations. The average age of Siouan language speakers was 40 years, which was lower than the age of those who reported it as their mother tongue (46 years). On average, Siouan language speakers were slightly older than all Indigenous language speakers, as the average age of all of those who could speak an Indigenous language was 37 years.

The prairies are the home of the Siouan languages. More than ninety percent of those who could speak a Siouan language lived in one of the three prairie provinces: Manitoba (30.4%), Saskatchewan (24.5%) and Alberta (39.1%).

The speaker base of Dakota—the largest Siouan language—was largely found in Manitoba (58.4%), though a number of Dakota speakers also lived in Saskatchewan (26.2%) and Alberta (13.1%). Just over half of all of those who could speak Assiniboiné lived in Saskatchewan (51.4%), while 36.5% lived in Alberta in 2021. Among those who could speak Stoney, the vast majority lived in Alberta (96.2%).

Siouan languages, not included elsewhere were largely dispersed throughout Saskatchewan (43.1%), Alberta (29.2%), British Columbia (16.9%) and Ontario (9.2%).

Key concepts

Mother tongue – Refers to the first language learned in childhood that is still understood.

Knowledge – Refers to those who were able to speak a given language well enough to conduct a conversation.

Average age – Average age is a good indicator of the general health of a language. The average age of the mother tongue population is an indicator of the intergenerational transmission of an Indigenous language. A language with a young average age implies that children and young people are continuing to acquire an Indigenous language as their first language.

Indigenous language acquisition – This variable refers to how Indigenous language speakers learned the language they speak, whether as a mother tongue or as a second language.

Learned as a mother tongue – This group is comprised of those who reported an Indigenous mother tongue on the 2021 Census and who could still speak that same language well enough to conduct a conversation.

Learned as a second language – This group is comprised of those who could speak an Indigenous language, but who did not report that same language on the mother tongue question.

Second language index – The second language index is calculated by dividing the number of people who can speak an Indigenous language by the number who reported the same language as their mother tongue, expressed per 100 people. A value of 100 implies all speakers learned their language as a mother tongue, whereas more than 100 implies some speakers must have learned their language as a second language.

Silent speakers – This refers to people who have an Indigenous mother tongue, but—while they still understand it—can no longer speak the language well enough to conduct a conversation. In some circumstances, this may reflect those who have not continued to use their mother tongue over time or those who do not have a community of other speakers of the same language with whom to converse.

Home language – This refers to the extent to which respondents speak a given language at home.

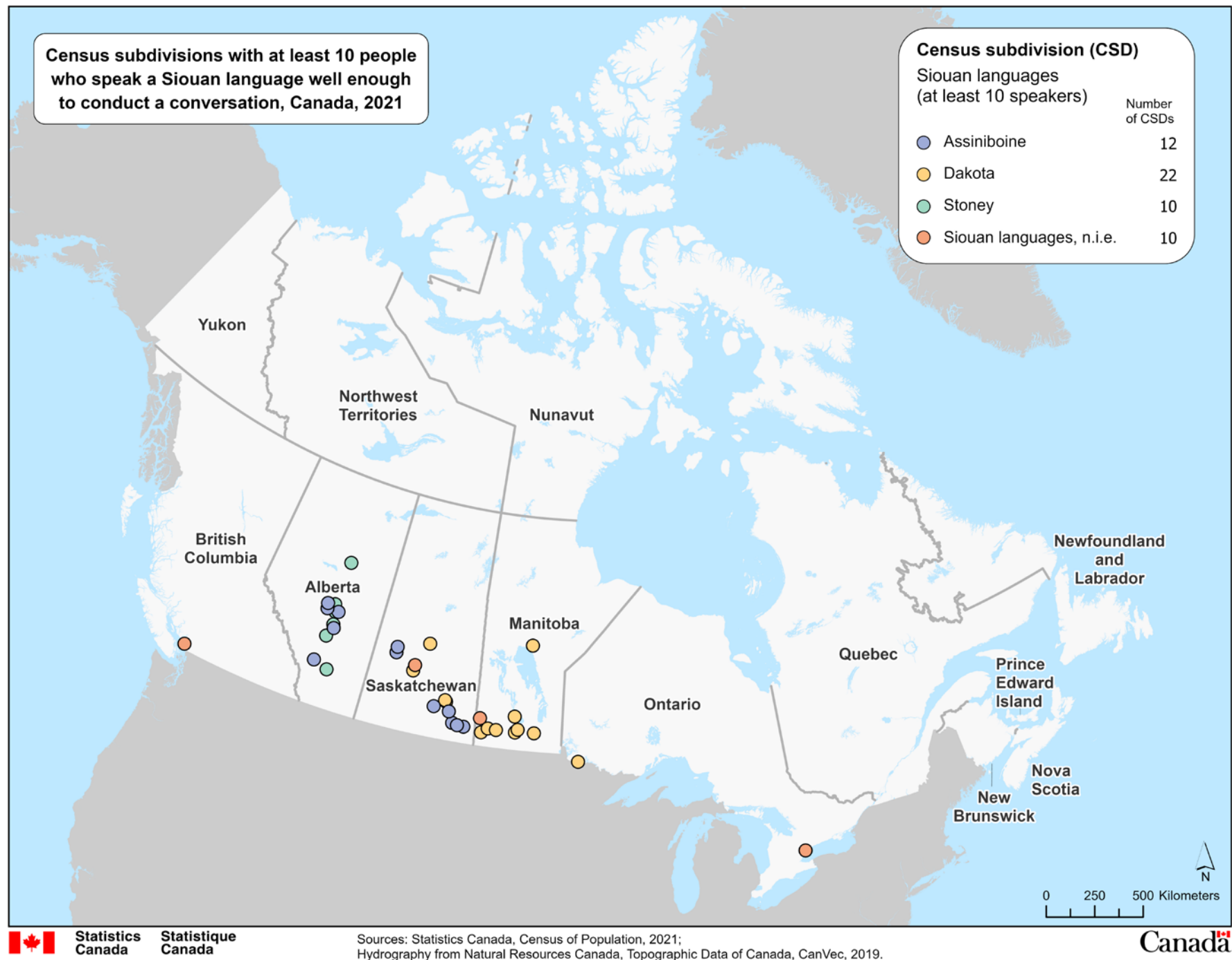
Spoken most often at home – This refers to the language the person speaks most often at home at the time of data collection. A person can report more than one language as “spoken most often at home” if the languages are spoken equally often. In many circumstances, a language spoken most often at home could be thought to reflect the speaker’s “main” language.

Language(s) spoken regularly at home – This refers to the language(s), if any, that the person speaks at home on a regular basis at the time of data collection, other than the language(s) they speak most often at home.

Continuity index – This index measures language retention by dividing the number of people who speak a given language most often at home by the total number who have that same language as their mother tongue, expressed per 100 people.

Language of work – This refers to the extent to which respondents speak a given language at work, for the population aged 15 years and over, who worked since 2020. As with home language, it can be expressed as either the language used most often at work, or a language that is spoken regularly.

For more information on concepts from the 2021 Census of Population, see [Dictionary, Census of Population, 2021 \(statcan.gc.ca\)](https://www2021.statcan.gc.ca/dictionary).

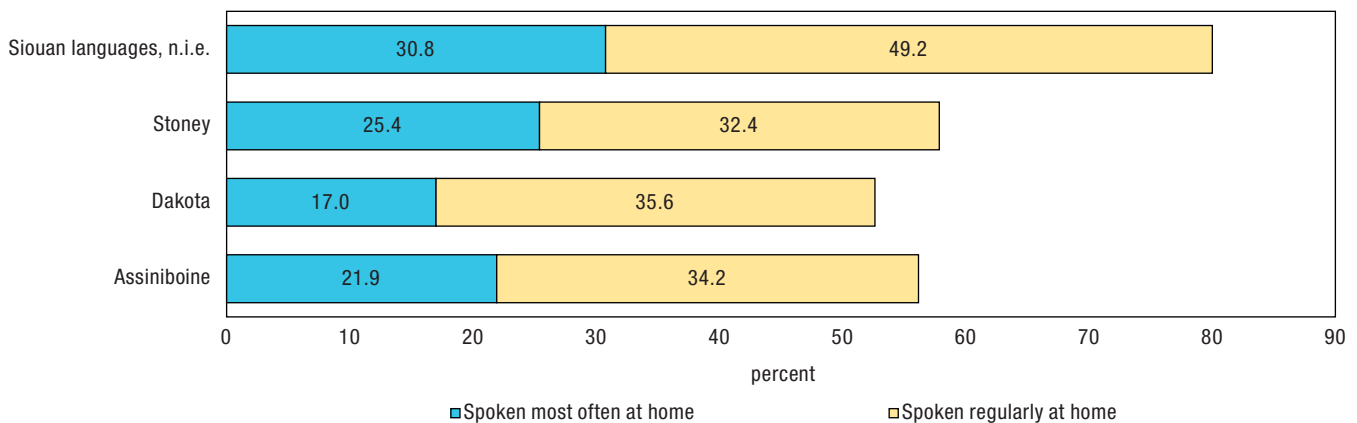


Home use and second-language speakers

The extent to which people speak a language at home is an important indicator of language maintenance and its overall health. In 2021, 1,630 people spoke a Siouan language at home. For the majority of this group (65.3%), a Siouan language was spoken at home on a regular basis; while for the other 34.7% it was spoken most often at home. Chart 1 shows the share of a Siouan language speakers who spoke an Indigenous language most often or regularly at home; it is organized by the average age of the mother tongue population in order to show variations on the relationship between the age of speakers and their likelihood of using the language at home.

Chart 1

Proportion who speak a Siouan language most often or regularly at home among those with knowledge of that language, ordered by the average age of mother tongue population of each language, Canada, 2021



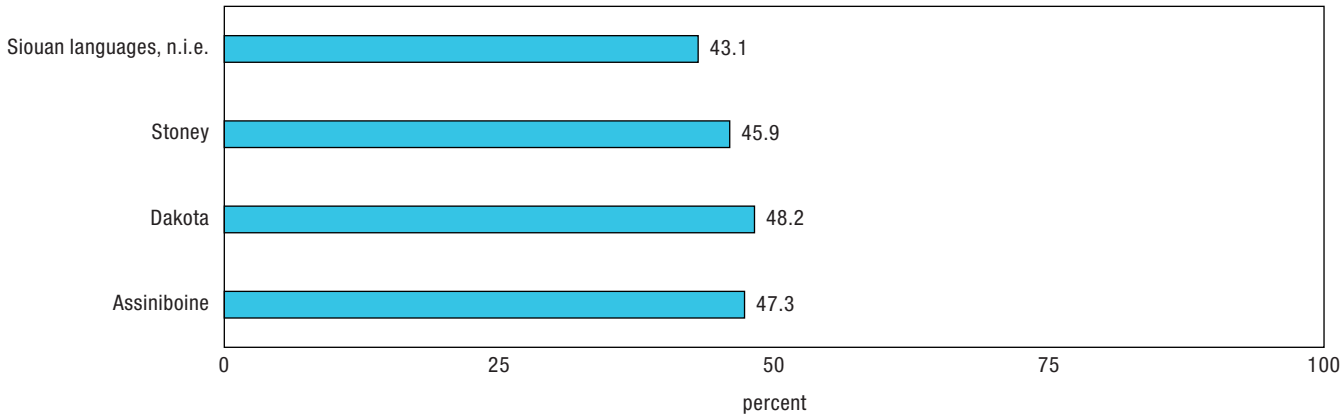
Note: n.i.e. = not included elsewhere.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

The continuity index is a measure of language retention. It compares the number of people who speak a given language at home divided by the number who have that same language as a mother tongue, expressed per 100 people. A figure of more than 100 means that more people spoke the language at home than had it as a mother tongue, while a figure that is less than 100 means that fewer people speak it at home than had it as a mother tongue. For the Siouan languages family, using only the language spoken most often at home, the continuity index was 32, in 2021.

Just over half of Siouan language speakers learned their language as their mother tongue. This was true of 51.9% of all people who could speak a Siouan language well enough to conduct a conversation. The remaining 48.1% of speakers are classified as “second-language speakers” (see chart 2 for the share of second language speakers for specific languages); however, this designation should not be taken literally as this group could include those who learned a Siouan language as a third or fourth language.

Chart 2
Proportion of Siouan language speakers who learned their language as a second language, ordered by the average age of the mother tongue population of each language, Canada, 2021



Note: n.i.e. = not included elsewhere.
Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

In general, those who learn their language as a mother tongue are more likely to use it at home than those who have acquired it as a second language. Table 3 shows the share of home use for those who learned a Siouan language as a mother tongue and those who learned it as a second language. Among those who learned a Siouan language as their mother tongue, 60.4% spoke the language at home (28.6% most often and 32.1% on a regular basis). Among second-language speakers, 50.5% spoke the language at home (9.5% most often and 40.7% on a regular basis). Home use among second-language speakers is an important indicator of revitalization, in relation to restoring the intergenerational transmission of Indigenous languages.

Silent speakers

The First Peoples’ Cultural Council (FPCC) defines silent speakers as “...people who have a good understanding of their language but do not speak it. There are many kinds of silent speakers, including people who spoke their language before attending residential school or people who grew up hearing their language and understand it, but do not speak it.”¹ This indicator is useful in the work toward the reclamation and recovery of Indigenous languages.

An additional 265 people who reported that a Siouan language was their mother tongue were no longer able to speak the language well enough to conduct a conversation; for the purposes of this study, these people are classified as “silent speakers”—those who can no longer conduct a conversation in their mother tongue, but still understand it, nonetheless. This group made up 15.1% of all of those with a Siouan language as their mother tongue.

Language of work

The Census of Population also collects information on the languages that people use most often at work. Among all employed persons, aged 15 years and over, who could speak a Siouan language, 9.7% reported that it was the language they used most often at work. Another 12.3% said that they spoke a Siouan language at work on a regular basis.

Siouan language-specific vitality summary

The following is a summary of the vitality of each of the languages discussed in this report, using the indicators of knowledge, mother tongue, the average ages of those with a mother tongue, second language speakers and silent speakers, the share of speakers who learned their language as a mother tongue and the proportion of those who speak their language most often or regularly at home. Together these are important indicators of language maintenance and revitalization.

1. First Peoples Cultural Council. [Reclaiming My Language Program - First Peoples Cultural Council \(fpcc.ca\)](https://fpcc.ca), accessed September 3rd, 2024.

Stoney had 925 speakers. There were 545 people who reported it as their mother tongue. While those with a mother tongue had an average age of 41 years, the average age of second language speakers was 33 years and the average age of silent speakers was 32 years. More than half (54.1%) of its speakers acquired their language as a mother tongue. Among home users, 44.3% spoke it most often and 56.6% spoke it regularly.

Dakota had 1,530 speakers. There were 915 people who reported it as their mother tongue. While those with a mother tongue had an average age of 48 years, the average age of second language speakers was 33 years and the average age of silent speakers was 38 years. More than half (52.0%) of its speakers acquired their language as a mother tongue. Among home users, 32.3% spoke it most often and 67.7% spoke it regularly.

Assiniboine had 365 speakers. There were 215 people who reported it as their mother tongue. While those with a mother tongue had an average age of 52 years, the average age of second language speakers was 40 years and the average age of silent speakers was 54 years. More than half (53.4%) of its speakers acquired their language as a mother tongue. Among home users, 39.0% spoke it most often and 61.0% spoke it regularly.

About this report

This report is based on data from the 2021 Census of Population long-form questionnaire, which collected information for the population in private households. To ensure the confidentiality of responses collected for the census, a random rounding process is used to alter the values reported in individual cells. As a result, when these data are summed or grouped, the total value may not match the sum of the individual values since the total and subtotals are independently rounded. Similarly, percentage distributions, which are calculated on rounded data, may not necessarily add up to 100%.

Because of random rounding, counts and percentages may vary slightly between different census products such as the analytical documents, highlight tables and data tables. While the effect of random rounding is generally negligible it may have a greater effect on certain populations, such as languages with smaller numbers of speakers.

Furthermore, languages with low numbers of speakers are suppressed to protect the confidentiality of respondents to the census questionnaire. As a result, these languages are collectively disseminated through the label of languages “not included elsewhere (n.i.e.)”.

Self-reporting of language data

Like all items on the census questionnaire, the language questions on the 2021 Census of Population are based on self-reporting. Therefore, responses to indicators—such as the ability to speak a language well enough to conduct a conversation—may vary depending upon the respondent, even among those with similar linguistic backgrounds. The issue of self-reporting also intersects with the fact that some respondents report the language(s) they speak within broad categories, while others report more specifically.

For more information language concepts, see [Languages Reference Guide, Census of Population, 2021 \(statcan.gc.ca\)](https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/92-62-x/2021001/article/00001-eng.htm).

Incomplete enumeration

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.

For more information on incompletely enumerated reserves and settlements, see [Appendix 1.5 – Incompletely enumerated reserves and settlements](#) in the Guide to the Census of Population, 2021.

Table 1
Selected indicators of Siouan languages, Canada, 2021

	Number	Percent	Average age
Able to speak Indigenous language well enough to conduct a conversation	2,965	...	40
Indigenous language as mother tongue	1,750	...	46
Able to speak Indigenous language well enough to conduct a conversation	2,965	100.0	40
Learned Indigenous language as mother tongue and still speak the language	1,540	51.9	47
Learned Indigenous language as second language	1,425	48.1	33
Second language index	...	169	...
Indigenous language as mother tongue	1,750	100.0	46
Can still speak Indigenous mother tongue	1,480	84.6	47
Silent speakers (mother tongue but can no longer speak)	265	15.1	40
Speaks Indigenous language at home	1,630	100.0	40
Speaks Indigenous language most often at home	565	34.7	42
Speaks Indigenous language at home on a regular basis	1,065	65.3	39
Continuity index (includes only language spoken most often at home)	...	32	...
Employed speakers aged 15 years and over	770	100.0	48
Speaks Indigenous language most often at work	75	9.7	54
Speaks Indigenous language at work on a regular basis	95	12.3	51
Does not speak Indigenous language at work	600	77.9	47

... not applicable

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Table 2
People who can speak an Indigenous language and have an Indigenous mother tongue by detailed list of Siouan languages, Canada, 2021

	Knowledge of Indigenous language		Indigenous mother tongue	
	number	average age	number	average age
Siouan languages	2,965	40	1,750	46
Assiniboiné	365	46	215	52
Dakota	1,530	42	915	48
Stoney	925	38	545	41
Siouan languages, n.i.e.	325	34	180	38

Note: n.i.e. = not included elsewhere.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Table 3
People who speak a Siouan language at home by Siouan language acquisition, Siouan language speakers, 2021

	Number	Percent	Average age
Learned Siouan language as mother tongue	1,540	100.0	47
Speaks Siouan language at home	930	60.4	46
Speaks Siouan language most often at home	440	28.6	45
Speaks Siouan language at home on a regular basis	495	32.1	48
Does not speak Siouan language at home	615	39.9	48
Learned Siouan language as second language	1,425	100.0	33
Speaks Siouan language at home	720	50.5	32
Speaks Siouan language most often at home	135	9.5	33
Speaks Siouan language at home on a regular basis	580	40.7	32
Does not speak Siouan language at home	700	49.1	35

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

