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Postsecondary educational attainment and labour market outcomes among Indigenous peoples in Canada, findings from the 2021 Census

by Alexandria Melvin

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Overview of the study

This study uses data from the 2021 Census to report on postsecondary educational attainment and labour market outcomes among Indigenous adults aged 25 to 64 years. As First Nations people, Métis and Inuit are more likely to live in certain regions, which can impact their participation in both education and the labour market, the article examines patterns among those residing in remote areas, on reserve, and communities across Inuit Nunangat.

- Just under half (49.2%) of Indigenous adults had completed a postsecondary qualification in 2021. The most common highest level of education was the completion of a college, CEGEP or other non-university certificate or diploma. This was seen for both Indigenous men and women.
- Among Indigenous adults, the share with a postsecondary qualification was higher in areas closer to, or with greater access to economic centres. The difference between those living in easily accessible areas compared with very remote areas was greatest among Inuit (49.4% versus 21.7%).
- Compared with five years earlier, the share with a bachelor's degree or higher increased for First Nations people (+1.6 percentage points (p.p.)), Métis (+2.5 p.p.) and Inuit (+0.9 p.p.). This occurred across all levels of remoteness, though some areas showed larger increases than others. Among First Nations people and Métis, greater increases were seen for those living in easily accessible areas when compared with very remote areas.
- The employment rate among Indigenous adults in 2021 was lower when compared with the non-Indigenous population (61.2% and 74.1%, respectively). However, the difference in employment rates between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous population disappeared when only considering those with a bachelor's degree or higher (82.6% and 82.5%, respectively).
- Although Indigenous adults were, overall, less likely to be employed in professional occupations when compared with the non-Indigenous population (14.7% and 22.9%, respectively), Indigenous adults with a bachelor's degree or higher were more likely to work in professional occupations than non-Indigenous adults (55.7% and 49.1%).

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Introduction

Over the past decade, educational attainment among the Indigenous population has improved, particularly among Indigenous women.¹ Recent data from the 2021 Census show continued improvements in the proportion of First Nations people, Métis and Inuit who had completed high school, as well as those who had attained a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 2016.²

However, for First Nations people, Métis and Inuit, educational attainment lags behind that of the non-Indigenous population.³ This is especially true for the attainment of a bachelor's degree or higher. While the share of Indigenous people who had completed a bachelor's degree or higher in 2021 improved from five years prior, the gap between the Indigenous and the Canadian-born non-Indigenous population continued to widen.⁴

Indigenous people face a number of barriers to attaining higher levels of education, and these barriers may intersect and amplify challenges to participating in higher levels of education. Barriers can include, but are not limited to, inadequate financial resources or funding, the lack of culturally relevant curricula, a lack of confidence or feelings of unpreparedness, having personal or family responsibilities, experiences of racism and discrimination, and the effects of intergenerational trauma associated with residential schools.⁵

In addition, when compared with the non-Indigenous population, Indigenous people are more likely to live in remote or northern communities, where there may be limited or no access to higher education⁶ and participation in higher levels of education may require them to relocate.⁷ Those moving away

from their home communities to urban areas may experience a large culture shock as well as feelings of loneliness and isolation, and the lack of culturally appropriate supports may further impact this transition.⁸

It is well-established that there is an association between educational attainment and improved labour market outcomes, such as greater labour market participation, rates of employment and earnings for those with higher level of education.⁹ There is also evidence that the association between completing higher levels of education and employment is stronger for Indigenous people when compared with the non-Indigenous population.¹⁰ Though employment rates and labour force participation rates for the Indigenous population fall below that of the non-Indigenous population, this gap narrows at higher levels of education.¹¹

This article uses data from the 2021 Census of Population to report on postsecondary educational attainment among Indigenous adults aged 25 to 64 years, including changes in educational attainment since 2016 (see box "[Data sources, methods and definitions](#)"). This article also describes labour market outcomes among Indigenous adults and highlights outcomes for those with higher levels of education.

Almost half of Indigenous adults had completed a postsecondary qualification in 2021

In 2021, just under half (49.2%) of Indigenous people aged 25 to 64 years had completed a postsecondary certificate, degree or diploma, a rate lower than that of non-Indigenous people (68.0%) (Table 1). Rates of postsecondary completion were

45.3% for First Nations people,¹² 56.3% for Métis and 33.6% among Inuit.

Among Indigenous people with a postsecondary qualification, almost three in four (73.7%) had a postsecondary certificate or diploma below the bachelor level, where 46.0% had a college, CEGEP or other non-university certificate or diploma and 22.4% had an apprenticeship or trades certificate or diploma. Indeed, across all three Indigenous groups, completion of a college, CEGEP or other non-university certificate or diploma was the most commonly reported highest level of educational attainment for both men and women who had completed a postsecondary qualification.

Indigenous women were more likely to have completed a postsecondary qualification when compared with Indigenous men. More than half (53.5%) of Indigenous women had completed a postsecondary qualification, compared with 44.4% of Indigenous men. While a similar gender difference was also seen for the non-Indigenous population (5.7 percentage point (p.p.) difference), the difference was greater among Indigenous people (9.1 p.p. difference) due to larger gender differences among First Nations people (9.8 p.p. difference) and Métis (8.5 p.p. difference).

Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous men were more likely than women to have attained an apprenticeship or trades certificate or diploma; however, the share with this certification was higher among First Nations and Métis men than among Inuit and non-Indigenous men (15.0% and 18.2% versus 13.2% and 13.2%). In contrast, Indigenous women were more likely to have completed any other postsecondary

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Table 1
Highest level of education among adults aged 25 to 64 years, by Indigenous identity and gender, 2021

Highest level of education	Indigenous			First Nations (single identity)			Métis (single identity)			Inuit (single identity)			Non-Indigenous		
	Total	Men+	Women+	Total	Men+	Women+	Total	Men+	Women+	Total	Men+	Women+	Total	Men+	Women+
	percentage														
No certificate, diploma or degree	22.3	25.8	19.1	26.0	30.0	22.6	14.8	17.8	12.0	43.7	47.0	40.6	9.3	10.7	7.9
High (secondary) school diploma or equivalency certificate	28.5	29.8	27.4	28.6	29.9	27.5	28.9	30.4	27.6	22.7	21.7	23.6	22.7	24.2	21.3
Postsecondary qualification (including certificate, diploma or degree)	49.2	44.4	53.5	45.3	40.1	49.9	56.3	51.9	60.4	33.6	31.2	35.8	68.0	65.1	70.8
Postsecondary certificate or diploma below bachelor level	36.3	35.4	37.1	34.0	32.7	35.2	40.6	40.2	41.0	27.4	27.5	27.3	34.2	34.7	33.7
Apprenticeship or trades certificate or diploma	11.0	16.2	6.4	10.4	15.0	6.4	12.1	18.2	6.6	8.8	13.2	4.8	9.6	13.2	6.1
College, CEGEP or other non-university certificate or diploma	22.6	17.4	27.3	20.9	15.9	25.3	25.8	20.1	31.0	17.2	13.3	20.6	21.4	18.7	23.9
University certificate or diploma below bachelor level	2.6	1.8	3.4	2.7	1.8	3.5	2.7	1.9	3.4	1.4	0.9	1.9	3.2	2.8	3.7
Bachelor's degree or higher	12.9	9.0	16.4	11.3	7.4	14.7	15.7	11.7	19.5	6.2	3.7	8.5	33.8	30.4	37.1

Note: Given that the non-binary population is small, data aggregation to a two-category gender variable is sometimes necessary to protect the confidentiality of responses provided. In these cases, individuals in the category "non-binary persons" are distributed into the other two gender categories and are denoted by the "+" symbol. The category "Men+" includes men, as well as some non-binary persons. The category "Women+" includes women, as well as some non-binary persons.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

qualifications than Indigenous men, including a bachelor's degree or higher (16.4% for women compared with 9.0% among men). This trend was also present for non-Indigenous women and men.

The share with postsecondary qualifications is lower in more remote areas

First Nations people, Métis and Inuit are more likely to live in certain geographic regions, which can impact their participation in formal education. Indeed, educational attainment has been shown to correlate with level of remoteness,¹³ a concept which describes the extent to which a municipality is remote, or far from neighbouring population centres (see box "[Data sources, methods and definitions](#)").

The share of Indigenous people with a postsecondary qualification was higher in more accessible areas (Chart 1). This trend was observed among all Indigenous

groups, but the difference between those living in easily accessible areas compared with very remote areas was greater among Inuit and First Nations people.¹⁴ This difference was particularly notable among Inuit, where those living in easily accessible areas (49.4%) were more than twice as likely to have a postsecondary qualification than their counterparts in very remote areas (21.7%).

Much of the regional variation in postsecondary attainment among Inuit can be attributed to the large share of Inuit living in Inuit Nunangat, of which all areas are classified as remote or very remote. In 2021, over two-thirds (69.0%) of Inuit lived in Inuit Nunangat, which is composed of four regions: Nunatsiavut (northern Labrador), Nunavik (northern Quebec), Nunavut and the Inuvialuit Region (northern Northwest Territories). For those living in Inuit Nunangat, there are limited opportunities

to participate in higher levels of education, where those who pursue further education must often leave their community and their support system.¹⁵

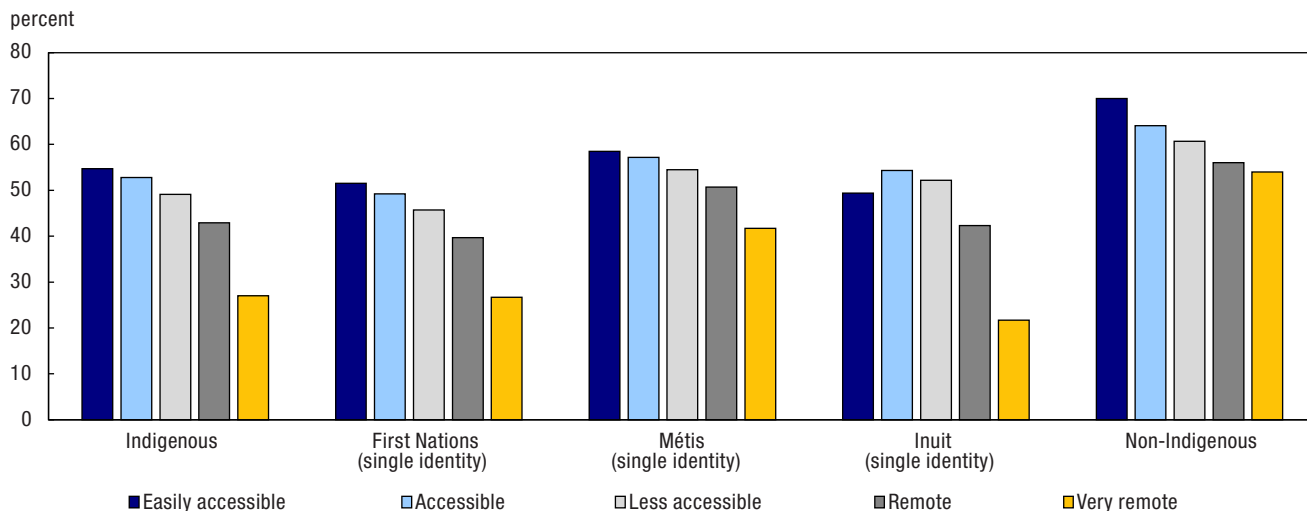
Indeed, in 2021, the share with a postsecondary qualification was over two times higher for Inuit living outside Inuit Nunangat when compared to Inuit living in Inuit Nunangat (52.8% versus 23.7%) (see Table A.2 in appendix). The gap in formal educational attainment between Inuit living inside and outside Inuit Nunangat was particularly notable for those with degrees at the bachelor's level or higher, where Inuit living outside Inuit Nunangat were close to five times as likely to have a credential at the bachelor's level or higher than Inuit living in Inuit Nunangat (13.0% and 2.7%).

In the case of First Nations people with Registered or Treaty Indian status, postsecondary attainment varies considerably depending on where they live. Among First Nations

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Chart 1

Percent of adults aged 25 to 64 years with a postsecondary qualification, by Indigenous identity and level of remoteness, 2021



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

people with Registered or Treaty Indian status, 47.6% of those living off reserve held a postsecondary qualification compared with 34.0% of those living on reserve (see Table A.3 in appendix). The overall lower rate of postsecondary attainment on reserve partially reflects the geographic distribution of those living on reserve. Among First Nations people with Registered or Treaty Indian status living on reserve, approximately three in five (60.4%) live in a remote or very remote area, where there may be limited or no access to postsecondary opportunities. In contrast, for First Nations people with Registered or Treaty Indian status living off reserve, far fewer (20.8%) lived in remote or very remote areas. Across all levels of remoteness, the share with a postsecondary qualification was higher for First Nations people with Registered or Treaty Indian status living off reserve, when compared to their counterparts living on reserve.¹⁶

The share of Indigenous adults with a bachelor's degree or higher increased from 2016, although the gap between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous population grew

Previous research has shown that the share of Indigenous adults with a postsecondary qualification has been increasing over time, where the magnitude of change varies by both type of postsecondary qualification as well as Indigenous group.¹⁷

When comparing 2021 with five years earlier, the share with a postsecondary certificate or diploma below the bachelor level had declined among both Indigenous and non-Indigenous adults (-2.2 percentage points (p.p.) and -2.0 p.p., respectively), where change varied by type of credential. In 2021, the share of Indigenous people whose highest level of education was a university certificate or diploma below the bachelor's level was

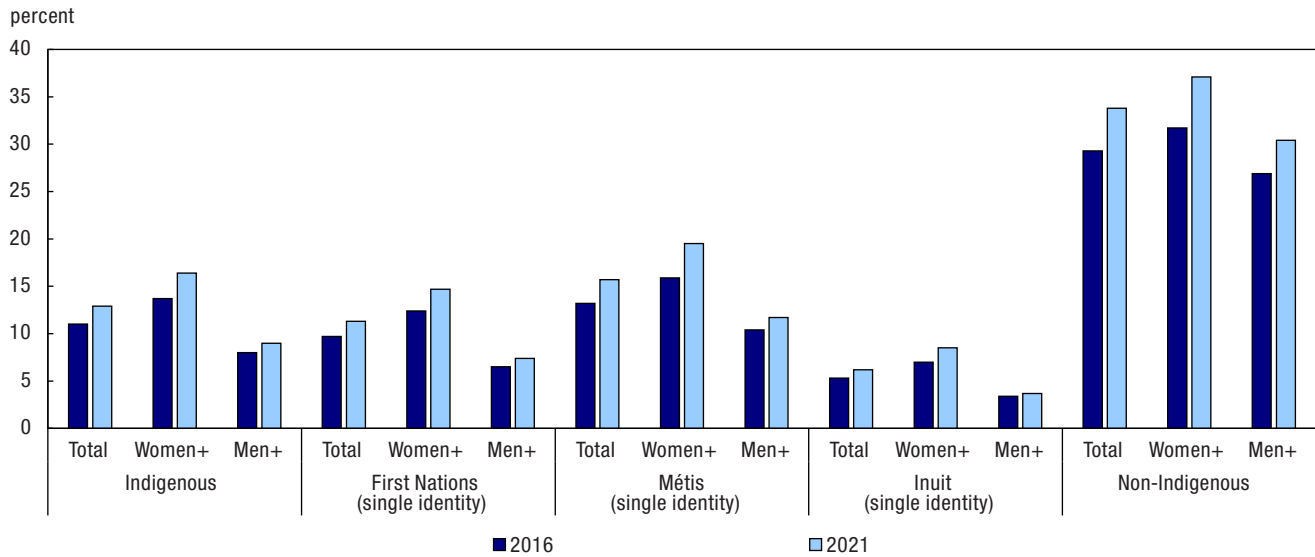
unchanged from 2016 (0.0 p.p.),¹⁸ whereas the share of Indigenous people with a college, CEGEP or other non-university certificate or diploma had declined slightly from 2016 (-0.4 p.p.). While the share with a college, CEGEP or other non-university certificate or diploma had changed little among Métis (+0.2 p.p.), declines occurred among First Nations people, Inuit as well as among the non-Indigenous population (-0.6, -1.5 and -1.0 p.p., respectively).¹⁹

Among both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, there were declines in the share whose highest level of education was an apprenticeship or trades certificate or diploma (-1.7 and -1.1 p.p., respectively). However, when looking specifically at the share of Indigenous people with an apprenticeship certificate, smaller declines were observed from five years earlier (-0.4 p.p.). Similar findings were seen among First

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Chart 2

Percentage of adults aged 25 to 64 years with a bachelor's degree or higher, by Indigenous identity and gender, 2016 and 2021



Notes: Although sex and gender refer to two different concepts, the introduction of gender is not expected to have a significant impact on data analysis and historical comparability, given the small size of the transgender and non-binary populations. For more information on changes of concepts over time, please consult the Age, Sex at Birth and Gender Reference Guide, Census of Population, 2021. Given that the non-binary population is small, data aggregation to a two-category gender variable is sometimes necessary to protect the confidentiality of responses provided. In these cases, individuals in the category “non-binary persons” are distributed into the other two gender categories and are denoted by the “+” symbol. Prior to the 2021 Census, the category “men” referred to males and the category “women” referred to females. Starting in 2021, the category “men+” includes men, as well as some non-binary persons, and the category “women+” includes women, as well as some non-binary persons. Estimates in this figure have been adjusted to account for differences in incompletely enumerated reserves and settlements over time.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016. Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Nations people, Métis, Inuit and the non-Indigenous population (-0.2, -0.4, -0.9 and -0.5 p.p., respectively).

In contrast, the share of Indigenous people with a bachelor’s degree or higher increased by 1.9 percentage points compared to 2016. The increase in the proportion with a bachelor’s degree or higher was seen for First Nations people (+1.6 p.p.),²⁰ Métis (+2.5 p.p.) and Inuit (+0.9 p.p.) (Chart 2). Though the share of Indigenous adults with a bachelor’s degree or higher increased from 2016 to 2021, the gap between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous population grew, as the share of the non-Indigenous population with a bachelor’s degree

or higher outpaced the growth among the Indigenous population (+4.5 and +1.9 p.p., respectively).

These increases in the share of Indigenous people with a bachelor’s degree or higher occurred across all levels of remoteness, though some areas showed greater increases than others. For example, among First Nations people and Métis, greater increases were seen for those living in easily accessible areas (+1.8 and +2.1 p.p., respectively) when compared with very remote areas (+0.2 and +1.4 p.p., respectively).

Similarly, greater increases in the share with a bachelor’s degree or higher occurred for First Nations people with Registered or Treaty

Indian status living off reserve when compared to those living on reserve (+1.6 and +0.6 p.p., respectively) as well as for Inuit living outside of Inuit Nunangat when compared with Inuit in Inuit Nunangat (+1.1 and +0.3 p.p., respectively).

While increases in postsecondary attainment among Indigenous people reflect increases in enrollment and graduation, some change over time may be due to response mobility. Response mobility describes the phenomenon by which people provide different responses over time to census questions about Indigenous identity.²¹ Response mobility can be influenced by a number of factors, such as legislative changes, court decisions, as well as changes in the

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respondents' social environment and their understanding of their family history.²² Respondents with a high level of educational attainment who change the way they respond, from not identifying as Indigenous in past censuses to later identifying as Indigenous, can contribute to some (but not all) of the increases in educational attainment over time.

Employment rates among the Indigenous population fall below that of the non-Indigenous population, but rates are similar among those with higher levels of educational attainment

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and resultant public health measures caused a significant downturn in employment and hours worked

throughout Canada. Data from the Labour Force Survey indicated that following the initial phase of the pandemic, there was a trend of employment rates improving for Indigenous people living off reserve in the provinces. However, from March to May 2021, employment rates were still below pre-pandemic levels.²³

During the 2021 Census reference week, from May 2nd to May 8th, over three in five (61.2%) Indigenous adults aged 25 to 64 years were employed, where the proportion employed was 56.6% among First Nations people,²⁴ 68.8% for Métis, and 55.2% for Inuit (Table 2).

The employment rate among Indigenous people was lower when compared with the non-Indigenous population (61.2% and 74.1%,

respectively). However, the gap between the two groups varied greatly according to educational attainment, with the gap tending to narrow as the level of education increased. Specifically, the gap in employment rates was the greatest among those that had no certificate, diploma or degree (38.1% for Indigenous adults and 52.6% for non-Indigenous adults), while there was no gap among those with a bachelor's degree or higher (82.6% for Indigenous adults and 82.5% for non-Indigenous adults) (Table 2). The higher employment rates for those with a higher level of education was particularly notable among First Nations people, where those with a bachelor's degree or higher (80.8%) were more than twice as likely to be employed than those with no formal education (35.2%).

Table 2
Labour force participation rates, employment rates, and unemployment rates among adults aged 25 to 64 years, by Indigenous identity and highest level of education, 2021

Highest level of education	Indigenous	First Nations (single identity)	Métis (single identity)	Inuit (single identity)	Non-Indigenous
	percentage				
Participation rate					
Total	70.6	66.5	77.2	66.2	81.0
No certificate, diploma or degree	48.9	45.7	56.8	52.1	61.6
High (secondary) school diploma or equivalency certificate	68.5	64.7	74.1	72.5	74.8
Postsecondary certificate or diploma below bachelor level	79.4	77.2	82.3	78.4	83.7
Bachelor's degree or higher	87.7	86.5	89.0	89.0	87.7
Employment rate					
Total	61.2	56.6	68.8	55.2	74.1
No certificate, diploma or degree	38.1	35.2	45.4	40.5	52.6
High (secondary) school diploma or equivalency certificate	58.0	53.6	64.5	60.8	66.3
Postsecondary certificate or diploma below bachelor level	70.4	67.5	74.3	67.3	76.9
Bachelor's degree or higher	82.6	80.8	84.5	84.9	82.5
Unemployment rate					
Total	13.2	14.8	10.9	16.7	8.4
No certificate, diploma or degree	22.1	23.1	20.0	22.5	14.5
High (secondary) school diploma or equivalency certificate	15.3	17.1	13.0	16.1	11.3
Postsecondary certificate or diploma below bachelor level	11.3	12.5	9.6	14.1	8.1
Bachelor's degree or higher	5.9	6.6	5.1	4.6	5.9

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

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Geographic differences in employment rates lessened for those with a bachelor's degree or higher

The geographic differences in employment rates were lessened when considering those with a higher level of education. Among Indigenous adults overall, employment rates tended to decrease in more remote areas, where the lowest employment rates were seen among those living in very remote areas (Table 3).

However, for Indigenous people with a bachelor's degree or higher, there was little difference in the employment rates across areas of remoteness (Chart 3). Among Métis, for example, this trend was reversed when considering those with a bachelor's degree or higher, with the employment rate of those living in very remote areas being

higher than that of those living in easily accessible areas (90.4% and 84.3%, respectively).

Similarly, the downward trend in employment rates with increasing remoteness was less pronounced for First Nations people and Inuit with higher levels of education.²⁵

Lower levels of unemployment in Inuit Nunangat among Inuit with a bachelor's degree or higher

The unemployment rate was also significantly lower among Indigenous adults who had attained a bachelor's degree or a higher. During the 2021 Census reference week, 5.9% of Indigenous people with a bachelor's degree or higher were unemployed, compared with 13.2% of Indigenous people overall. In addition, although the unemployment rate among the

Indigenous population was higher than that of the non-Indigenous population (13.2% and 8.4%), the unemployment rate among those with a bachelor's degree or higher was similar for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (both at 5.9%) (Table 2).

Among First Nations people with Registered or Treaty Indian status who had a bachelor's degree or higher, the unemployment rate was similar for those living on and off reserve (6.7% and 6.7%). Similarly, the trend in unemployment was lessened for Inuit with a bachelor's degree or higher, where there was little difference in unemployment rates for Inuit living in Inuit Nunangat when compared to their counterparts living outside Inuit Nunangat (5.1% and 4.8%, respectively) (see Tables A.5 and A.6 in appendix).

Table 3
Labour force participation rates, employment rates, and unemployment rates among adults aged 25 to 64 years, by Indigenous identity and level of remoteness, 2021

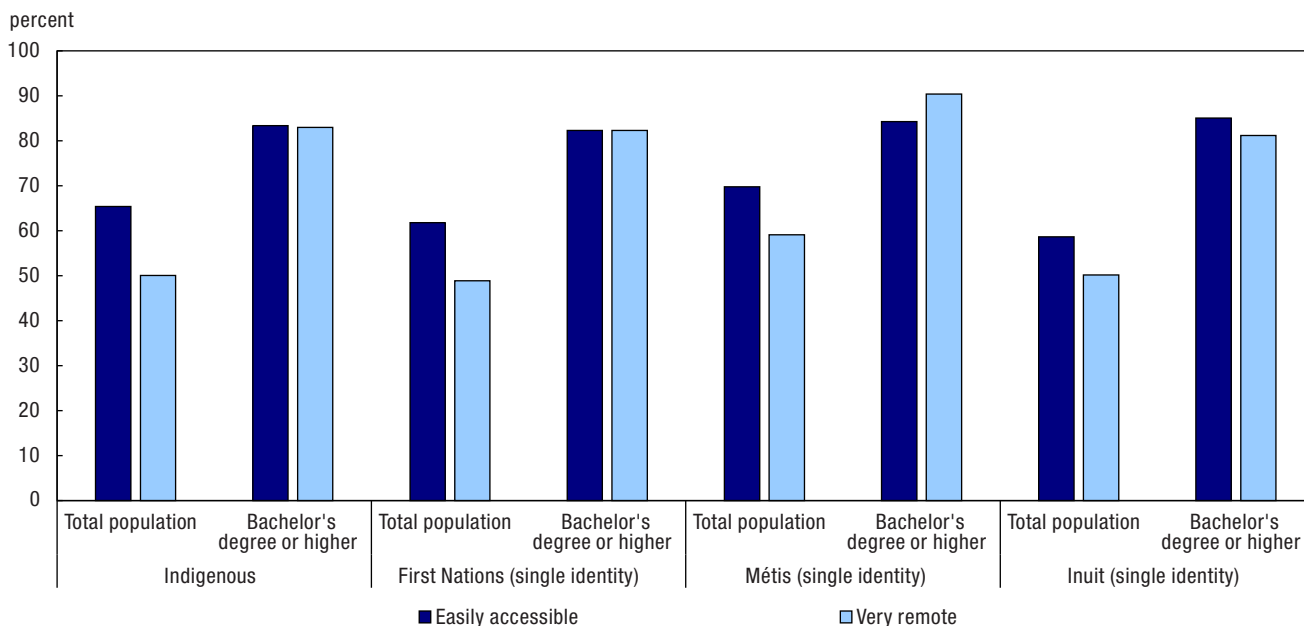
Level of remoteness	Indigenous	First Nations (single identity)	percentage		
			Métis (single identity)	Inuit (single identity)	Non-Indigenous
Participation rate					
Easily accessible	74.4	71.3	78.2	69.3	81.5
Accessible	71.4	66.6	77.4	71.9	79.8
Less accessible	69.6	65.3	76.3	76.1	78.7
Remote	66.7	62.8	75.3	70.9	78.0
Very remote	59.9	58.0	70.7	61.9	76.9
Employment rate					
Easily accessible	65.4	61.8	69.8	58.7	74.6
Accessible	62.0	56.1	69.1	61.2	73.6
Less accessible	60.3	55.2	68.2	65.2	72.4
Remote	56.8	52.5	66.6	60.8	71.0
Very remote	50.1	48.9	59.1	50.2	68.0
Unemployment rate					
Easily accessible	12.0	13.3	10.7	15.3	8.5
Accessible	13.2	15.7	10.7	14.9	7.9
Less accessible	13.4	15.4	10.6	14.4	8.1
Remote	14.8	16.3	11.5	14.2	9.0
Very remote	16.4	15.6	16.3	18.8	11.7

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

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Chart 3

Employment rates among adults aged 25 to 64, by Indigenous identity, highest level of education and level of remoteness, 2021



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Indigenous adults with a bachelor's degree or higher were more likely to work in professional occupations than non-Indigenous adults

Among Indigenous adults who were employed in 2021, just over one in seven (14.7%) were employed in professional occupations (Training, Education, Experience and Responsibilities (TEER) category I),²⁶ which typically require a bachelor's degree or higher,²⁷ where the share in professional occupations was 13.8% for First Nations people,²⁸ 15.9% for Métis and 13.4% among Inuit (Chart 4) (see box "[Data sources, methods and definitions](#)"). This compares to 22.9% among the non-Indigenous population.

Across all Indigenous groups, women (First Nations, 18.6%; Métis, 20.7%; Inuit, 18.6%) were approximately twice as likely to be employed in these professional occupations when compared with Indigenous men (First Nations, 8.6%; Métis, 10.9%; Inuit, 7.5%). This is in line with the fact that Indigenous women (16.4%) are more likely than their male counterparts (9.0%) to have an education at the bachelor's level or higher. In contrast, when compared with their female counterparts, Indigenous men were more likely to work in TEER category 2 occupations, which would usually require a college diploma or apprenticeship training of two or more years or supervisory occupations.²⁹ The higher share

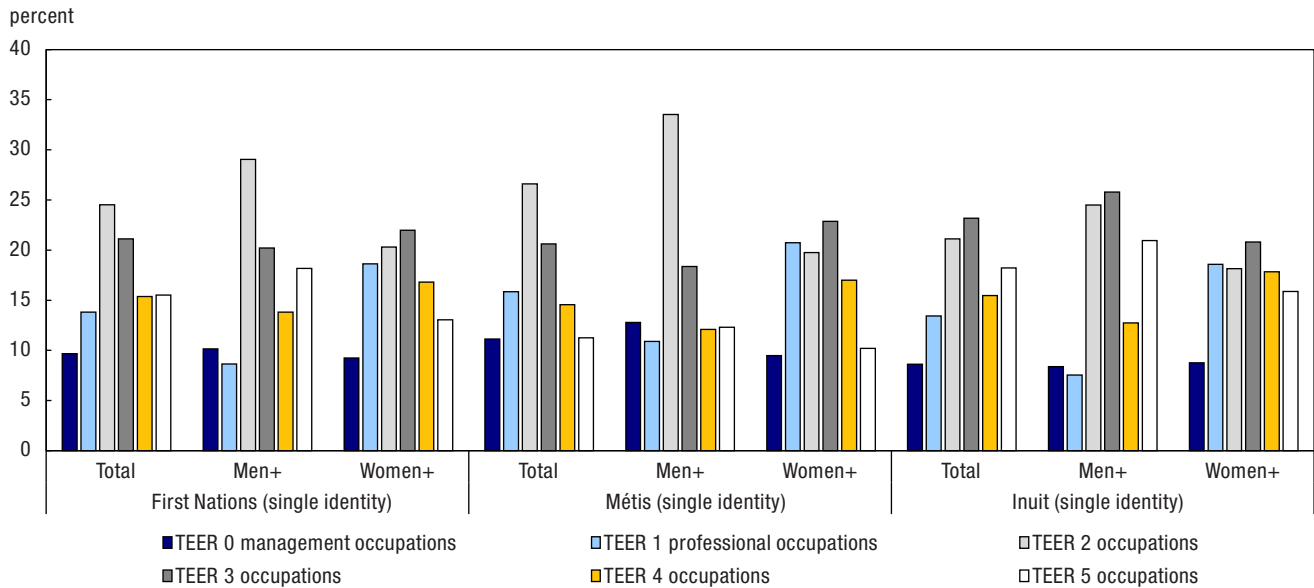
of men in these occupations may be due to the higher share of Indigenous men having attained an apprenticeship or trades certificate or diploma when compared to women (16.2% versus 6.4%).

Once again, the gap between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations disappears when only looking at those with an education at the bachelor's level or above. First Nations people³⁰ (54.8%), Métis (56.7%) and Inuit (56.5%) with a bachelor's degree or higher were all more likely to work in professional occupations than non-Indigenous people (49.1%) and were equally likely to work in professional occupations when compared to the Canadian-born,³¹ non-Indigenous population (55.0%).

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Chart 4

Percent distribution of Training, Education, Experience and Responsibilities (TEER) occupation categories, among Indigenous adults aged 25 to 64 years who were employed in the reference week, by Indigenous identity and gender, 2021



Note: Given that the non-binary population is small, data aggregation to a two-category gender variable is sometimes necessary to protect the confidentiality of responses provided. In these cases, individuals in the category "non-binary persons" are distributed into the other two gender categories and are denoted by the "+" symbol. The category "Men+" includes men, as well as some non-binary persons. The category "Women+" includes women, as well as some non-binary persons.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Furthermore, Indigenous adults were less likely to experience overqualification than non-Indigenous adults, that is, to have a higher level of education than what is typically required for the position they hold. In 2021, 9.4% of Indigenous adults with a bachelor's degree or higher were overqualified,³² compared with 14.1% of the non-Indigenous population. Rates of overqualification for First Nations people³³ (9.5%), Métis (9.4%) and Inuit (7.9%) were all below that of the non-Indigenous population. Nevertheless, the higher rate of overqualification among the non-Indigenous population may be partially explained by the inclusion of racialized and immigrant populations with foreign credentials, populations that have higher rates

of overqualification than the non-racialized or Canadian-born population.³⁴ For example, when the rate of overqualification among the Indigenous population is compared with that of the Canadian-born, non-Indigenous population, the rates of overqualification are similar at 9.4%.

Conclusion

The share of Indigenous adults with a postsecondary qualification has been increasing over time, notably among those with a bachelor's degree or higher.³⁵ Results from this study indicate that though there were declines in the share of Indigenous adults reporting their highest level of education was a postsecondary certificate or diploma below bachelor level in 2021 when compared with five years earlier,

the share with a bachelor's degree or higher had increased across all Indigenous groups.

Increases in the share with a bachelor's degree or higher among Indigenous people occurred across all levels of remoteness, on and off reserve for status First Nations people, as well as inside and outside of Inuit Nunangat for Inuit. However, the magnitude of change varied by geography, where the greatest increases occurred in regions where rates of educational attainment are already relatively high. Lower rates of educational attainment among Indigenous people living in more rural or remote areas, First Nations people living on reserve, and Inuit living in Inuit Nunangat have been well documented. Smaller increases in the rates of educational attainment

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for these groups contribute to a growing gap for those living in these regions. Although those living in more remote areas may face additional barriers to pursuing higher levels of education, they often benefit from a closer connection to their communities, cultures, traditions, languages, lands and resources.

Although the employment rate among Indigenous people was lower when compared with the non-Indigenous population, the gap between the two populations narrows considerably or disappears for those with a bachelor's degree or higher. Similarly, Indigenous people with a bachelor's degree or higher were more likely to be employed in professional occupations when compared with the non-Indigenous population, as well as less likely to be overqualified.

As past data have shown, there are significant differences in labour force outcomes between First Nations people, Métis and Inuit by level of remoteness, as well as differences between First Nations people living on and off reserve, and Inuit living inside and outside Inuit Nunangat. However, among those with a bachelor's degree or higher, these differences are attenuated or in some cases reversed.

This study reported postsecondary educational attainment and labour force outcomes among First Nations people, Métis and Inuit using data from the 2021 Census. Although these data describe educational attainment and labour force outcomes as of May 2021, it is difficult to determine how these estimates were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the

resulting public health measures. Comparisons with prior census data and assessing trends over time is needed to evaluate how the pandemic impacted educational attainment and particularly labour force outcomes. Data from the 2022 Indigenous Peoples Survey will also provide a more comprehensive picture of how the pandemic impacted employment, work placements, training and courses among First Nations people living off reserve, Métis and Inuit.

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Data sources, methods and definitions

Data Sources

Data in this article are from the 2021 Census of Population long-form questionnaire. In addition, comparisons over time were made using data from the long-form questionnaire of the 2016 Census. Further information on the 2021 Census and 2016 Census are available.³⁶ Additional information on Census data quality, comparability for Indigenous peoples³⁷ and Census data related to education³⁸ is also available.

Methods

Comparisons between the 2021 Census and 2016 Census were conducted by adjusting for differences in incompletely enumerated reserves and settlements from one cycle to another.³⁹ For example, if a census subdivision (CSD) that is classified as a reserve or settlement was incompletely enumerated for the 2021 or 2016 Census, it should be excluded from the tabulations for both years when comparisons between the two are made. As a result, adjusted estimates used for historical comparison may differ from those based on unadjusted data. In the 2021 Census, there were 63 incompletely enumerated reserves out of a total of 1,026 census subdivisions in Canada that were classified as on reserve. This was up from 14 incompletely enumerated reserves in 2016.

To ensure the confidentiality of responses collected for the 2021 Census and 2016 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.

Definitions

Indigenous: Indigenous refers to whether the person identified with the Indigenous peoples of Canada. This includes those who identify as First Nations (North American Indian), Métis and/or Inuk (Inuit), and/or those who report being Registered or Treaty Indians (that is, registered under the Indian Act of Canada), and/or those who have membership in a First Nation or Indian band.

Data for Indigenous groups (First Nations, Métis or Inuit) refer to those who reported a single identity.

Gender: The sex variable in census years prior to 2021 and the two-category gender variable in the 2021 Census are combined in this analysis to make historical comparisons. Although sex and gender refer to two different concepts, the introduction of gender in 2021 is not expected to have a significant impact on data analysis and historical comparability, given the small size of the transgender and non-binary populations. For additional information on changes of concepts over time, please consult the [Age, Sex at Birth and Gender Reference Guide, Census of Population, 2021](#).

Given that the non-binary population is small, data aggregation to a two-category gender variable is sometimes necessary to protect the confidentiality of responses. In these cases, individuals in the category “non-binary persons” are distributed into the other two gender categories. Unless otherwise indicated in the text, the category “men” includes men, as well as some non-binary persons, while the category “women” includes women, as well as some non-binary persons.

A fact sheet on gender concepts, [Filling the gaps: Information on gender in the 2021 Census](#), is also available.

Remoteness: Statistics Canada’s Index of Remoteness was used to quantify the extent to which a CSD is remote, or far from neighbouring population centres. For each CSD, the remoteness index value was determined based on the CSD’s relative proximity to all surrounding population centres within a radius that permits daily accessibility (measured in travel cost), as well as the size of those population centres (measured in population size).⁴⁰ The remoteness index is a continuous index variable that provides a value for each CSD, ranging from 0 to 1, with 1 indicating the highest level of remoteness. The 2021 update of the classification of remoteness index was used to categorize remoteness index values. The Manual classification thresholds were used to classify remoteness index values into five categories of remoteness: easily accessible, accessible, less accessible, remote and very remote areas.⁴¹

Training, Education, Experience and Responsibilities (TEER) category: A TEER category is defined by the amount and type of training and education required to enter and perform the duties of an occupation. It also takes into consideration the experience required and the complexity of responsibilities involved in the work. Each TEER category reflects commonly accepted paths to employment in an occupation.⁴² The TEER concept replaces the skill-level concept in the National Occupational Classification 2021.

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Appendix

Table A.1
Highest level of education among First Nations people aged 25 to 64 years, by Registered or Treaty Indian status and gender, 2021

Highest level of education	First Nations people (single identity)			First Nations people (single identity) with Registered or Treaty Indian status			First Nations people (single identity) without Registered or Treaty Indian status		
	Total	Men+	Women+	Total	Men+	Women+	Total	Men+	Women+
	percentage								
No certificate, diploma or degree	26.0	30.0	22.6	29.1	33.2	25.5	17.3	20.7	14.3
High (secondary) school diploma or equivalency certificate	28.6	29.9	27.5	28.4	29.3	27.6	29.3	31.8	27.1
Postsecondary certificate, diploma or degree	45.3	40.1	49.9	42.5	37.5	46.8	53.4	47.5	58.6
Postsecondary certificate or diploma below bachelor level	34.0	32.7	35.2	32.1	31.0	33.1	39.5	37.7	41.0
Apprenticeship or trades certificate or diploma	10.4	15.0	6.4	9.6	14.3	5.6	12.6	17.1	8.7
College, CEGEP or other non-university certificate or diploma	20.9	15.9	25.3	19.7	14.9	23.9	24.5	18.8	29.3
University certificate or diploma below bachelor level	2.7	1.8	3.4	2.8	1.9	3.6	2.4	1.8	3.0
Bachelor's degree or higher	11.3	7.4	14.7	10.4	6.6	13.7	13.9	9.7	17.5

Note: Given that the non-binary population is small, data aggregation to a two-category gender variable is sometimes necessary to protect the confidentiality of responses provided. In these cases, individuals in the category "non-binary persons" are distributed into the other two gender categories and are denoted by the "+" symbol. The category "Men+" includes men, as well as some non-binary persons. The category "Women+" includes women, as well as some non-binary persons.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Table A.2
Highest level of education among Inuit aged 25 to 64 years, by residence inside and outside Inuit Nunangat and gender, 2021

Highest level of education	All Inuit			Inuit Nunangat			Outside Inuit Nunangat		
	Total	Men+	Women+	Total	Men+	Women+	Total	Men+	Women+
	percentage								
No certificate, diploma or degree	43.7	47.1	40.7	56.8	59.9	53.8	18.2	19.1	17.4
High (secondary) school diploma or equivalency certificate	22.7	21.8	23.6	19.5	17.9	21.0	29.0	30.1	28.1
Postsecondary certificate, diploma or degree	33.6	31.2	35.8	23.7	22.2	25.2	52.8	50.7	54.5
Postsecondary certificate or diploma below bachelor level	27.4	27.5	27.3	21.0	21.1	20.9	39.8	41.4	38.6
Apprenticeship or trades certificate or diploma	8.8	13.2	4.7	7.1	10.5	3.7	12.1	19.0	6.6
College, CEGEP or other non-university certificate or diploma	17.2	13.3	20.6	12.8	9.9	15.7	25.7	20.9	29.5
University certificate or diploma below bachelor level	1.4	0.9	1.9	1.1	0.7	1.5	2.1	1.4	2.6
Bachelor's degree or higher	6.2	3.7	8.5	2.7	1.1	4.3	13.0	9.3	15.9

Note: Given that the non-binary population is small, data aggregation to a two-category gender variable is sometimes necessary to protect the confidentiality of responses provided. In these cases, individuals in the category "non-binary persons" are distributed into the other two gender categories and are denoted by the "+" symbol. The category "Men+" includes men, as well as some non-binary persons. The category "Women+" includes women, as well as some non-binary persons.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

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Table A.3

Highest level of education among First Nations people with Registered or Treaty Indian status aged 25 to 64 years, by residence on and off reserve and gender, 2021

Highest level of education	All First Nations people			On reserve			Off reserve		
	Total	Men+	Women+	Total	Men+	Women+	Total	Men+	Women+
	percentage								
No certificate, diploma or degree	29.1	33.2	25.5	40.0	44.6	35.6	22.6	25.7	20.0
High (secondary) school diploma or equivalency certificate	28.4	29.3	27.6	26.0	25.5	26.5	29.8	31.7	28.3
Postsecondary certificate, diploma or degree	42.5	37.5	46.8	34.0	30.0	37.9	47.6	42.5	51.7
Postsecondary certificate or diploma below bachelor level	32.1	31.0	33.1	27.9	26.9	28.9	34.6	33.7	35.4
Apprenticeship or trades certificate or diploma	9.6	14.3	5.6	9.2	13.3	5.2	9.9	14.9	5.8
College, CEGEP or other non-university certificate or diploma	19.7	14.9	23.9	15.7	11.6	19.7	22.1	17.0	26.3
University certificate or diploma below bachelor level	2.8	1.9	3.6	3.0	2.0	4.1	2.6	1.8	3.3
Bachelor's degree or higher	10.4	6.6	13.7	6.1	3.1	9.0	12.9	8.8	16.3

Note: Given that the non-binary population is small, data aggregation to a two-category gender variable is sometimes necessary to protect the confidentiality of responses provided. In these cases, individuals in the category "non-binary persons" are distributed into the other two gender categories and are denoted by the "+" symbol. The category "Men+" includes men, as well as some non-binary persons. The category "Women+" includes women, as well as some non-binary persons.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Table A.4

Labour force participation rates, employment rates, and unemployment rates among First Nations people, aged 25 to 64 years, by Registered or Treaty Indian status and highest level of education, 2021

Highest level of education	First Nations people (single identity)	First Nations people (single identity) with Registered or Treaty Indian status	First Nations people (single identity) without Registered or Treaty Indian status
	percentage		
Participation rate			
Total - Highest certificate, diploma or degree	66.5	63.9	73.9
No certificate, diploma or degree	45.7	43.9	54.3
High (secondary) school diploma or equivalency certificate	64.7	62.5	70.8
Postsecondary certificate, diploma or degree	79.5	78.5	81.9
Postsecondary certificate or diploma below bachelor level	77.2	75.9	80.2
Bachelor's degree or higher	86.5	86.3	86.9
Employment rate			
Total - Highest certificate, diploma or degree	56.6	53.7	64.8
No certificate, diploma or degree	35.2	33.4	43.8
High (secondary) school diploma or equivalency certificate	53.6	51.2	60.2
Postsecondary certificate, diploma or degree	70.8	69.4	74.2
Postsecondary certificate or diploma below bachelor level	67.5	65.7	71.7
Bachelor's degree or higher	80.8	80.5	81.3
Unemployment rate			
Total - Highest certificate, diploma or degree	14.8	15.9	12.3
No certificate, diploma or degree	23.1	24.0	19.3
High (secondary) school diploma or equivalency certificate	17.1	18.0	15.0
Postsecondary certificate, diploma or degree	10.9	11.6	9.5
Postsecondary certificate or diploma below bachelor level	12.5	13.4	10.6
Bachelor's degree or higher	6.6	6.7	6.4

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

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Table A.5

Labour force participation rates, employment rates, and unemployment rates among First Nations people with Registered or Treaty Indian status aged 25 to 64 years, by residence on and off reserve and highest level of education, 2021

Highest level of education	Total	On reserve	Off reserve
	percentage		
Participation rate			
Total	63.9	56.4	68.3
No certificate, diploma or degree	43.9	41.7	46.3
High (secondary) school diploma or equivalency certificate	62.5	56.5	65.6
Postsecondary certificate or diploma below bachelor level	75.9	71.8	77.9
Bachelor's degree or higher	86.3	81.6	87.6
Employment rate			
Total	53.7	47.1	57.7
No certificate, diploma or degree	33.4	32.6	34.2
High (secondary) school diploma or equivalency certificate	51.2	46.6	53.7
Postsecondary certificate or diploma below bachelor level	65.7	62.2	67.5
Bachelor's degree or higher	80.5	76.3	81.8
Unemployment rate			
Total	15.9	16.5	15.6
No certificate, diploma or degree	24.0	22.0	26.0
High (secondary) school diploma or equivalency certificate	18.0	17.6	18.1
Postsecondary certificate or diploma below bachelor level	13.4	13.4	13.4
Bachelor's degree or higher	6.7	6.7	6.7

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Table A.6

Labour force participation rates, employment rates, and unemployment rates among Inuit aged 25 to 64 years, by residence inside and outside Inuit Nunangat and highest level of education, 2021

Highest level of education	Total	Inuit Nunangat	Outside Inuit Nunangat
	percentage		
Participation rate			
Total	66.2	62.9	72.8
No certificate, diploma or degree	52.1	52.7	48.6
High (secondary) school diploma or equivalency certificate	72.5	72.9	71.9
Postsecondary certificate or diploma below bachelor level	78.4	77.9	78.9
Bachelor's degree or higher	89.0	86.8	89.6
Employment rate			
Total	55.2	51.8	61.8
No certificate, diploma or degree	40.5	41.2	36.1
High (secondary) school diploma or equivalency certificate	60.8	62.0	59.3
Postsecondary certificate or diploma below bachelor level	67.3	66.9	67.8
Bachelor's degree or higher	84.9	82.5	85.3
Unemployment rate			
Total	16.7	17.6	15.1
No certificate, diploma or degree	22.5	21.9	25.8
High (secondary) school diploma or equivalency certificate	16.1	15.0	17.4
Postsecondary certificate or diploma below bachelor level	14.1	14.1	14.2
Bachelor's degree or higher	4.6	5.1	4.8

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

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Notes

1. Arriagada (2021), Statistics Canada (2017a) and Statistics Canada (2022a).
2. Statistics Canada (2022a).
3. Arriagada (2021).
4. Statistics Canada (2022a).
5. Bougie et al. (2013), Canadian Education Statistics Council & Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (2010), Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (2020) and Gaywish & Mordoch (2018).
6. Bleakney & Melvin (2022).
7. Canadian Education Statistics Council & Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (2010) and Holmes (2005).
8. Canadian Education Statistics Council & Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (2010), Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (2020) and St. Germaine (2022).
9. Bougie et al. (2013), Frank et al. (2015) and Statistics Canada (2023a).
10. Ciceri & Scott (2006).
11. Moyser (2017).
12. The share with a postsecondary qualification was 42.5% for First Nations people with Registered or Treaty Indian status and 53.4% for First Nations people without Registered or Treaty Indian status. For data on highest level of education among First Nations people with and without Registered or Treaty Indian status, see Table A.1.
13. Bleakney & Melvin (2022) and Leclerc (2022).
14. Among First Nations people with Registered or Treaty Indian status, the share with a postsecondary qualification was 49.7% in easily accessible areas, 46.8% in accessible areas, 44.2% in less accessible areas, 38.7% in remote areas and 26.2% in very remote areas. For First Nations people without Registered or Treaty Indian status, the share with a postsecondary qualification was 54.0% in easily accessible areas, 55.1% in accessible areas, 51.9% in less accessible areas, 47.9% in remote areas and 43.9% in very remote areas.
15. Lévesque (2012).
16. Among First Nations people with Registered or Treaty Indian status living on reserve, the share with a postsecondary qualification was 42.8% in easily accessible areas, 41.3% in accessible areas, 39.4% in less accessible areas, 34.9% in remote areas and 24.1% in very remote areas. For First Nations people with Registered or Treaty Indian status living off reserve, the share with a postsecondary qualification was 50.4% in easily accessible areas, 49.0% in accessible areas, 47.3% in less accessible areas, 43.4% in remote areas and 32.9% in very remote areas.
17. Arriagada (2021).
18. In 2021, the share whose highest level of education was a university certificate or diploma below the bachelor level was similar to 2016 for First Nations people, Métis and Inuit (-0.1, +0.1, 0.0 percentage points, respectively).
19. For Census questions on postsecondary credentials, two improvements were made to the electronic questionnaire in 2016 that are still applicable for the 2021 Census education data. First, new instructional text was added to emphasize that only completed credentials should be reported. Second, the detailed response categories on postsecondary qualifications were only displayed if the respondent selected “Yes” as a response to the new initial filter question. These improvements and the increased use of the electronic questionnaire (particularly in canvasser areas) further reduced the reporting of incomplete credentials in 2021. The changes contributed to the decline in the share of the population with college as their highest certificate, diploma or degree from 2016 to 2021. It is recommended that data users consider this information when comparing data on educational attainment with previous censuses, particularly for First Nations communities, Métis settlements, Inuit regions and other remote areas where the electronic questionnaire was used for the first time in 2021. For additional information please see Education reference guide, Census of Population, 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2022b).
20. In 2021, the share of First Nations people with Registered or Treaty Indian status with a bachelor’s degree or higher increased 1.4 percentage points from 2016. Among First Nations people without Registered or Treaty Indian status, the share with a bachelor’s degree or higher increased 2.0 percentage points from 2016.

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21. O'Donnell & Lapointe (2019).
22. Guimond et al. (2015) and O'Donnell & Lapointe (2019).
23. Bleakney et al. (2021).
24. The proportion employed was 53.7% among First Nations people with Registered or Treaty Indian status and 64.8% for First Nations people without Registered or Treaty Indian status. For data on labour force participation rates, employment rates, and unemployment rates among First Nations people with and without Registered or Treaty Indian status, see Table A.4.
25. For data on labour force participation rates, employment rates, and unemployment rates among First Nations people with Registered or Treaty Indian status living on and off reserve and Inuit living in Inuit Nunangat and outside Inuit Nunangat, see Table A.5 and Table A.6.
26. This refers to Training, Education, Experience and Responsibilities category 1 occupations in the National Occupational Classification 2021.
27. Training, Education, Experience and Responsibility category 1 occupations often require the completion of a university degree (bachelor's, master's or doctorate); or previous experience and expertise in subject matter knowledge from a related occupation found in TEER 2 (when applicable).
28. Among First Nations people, the share in professional occupations was 13.8% for both those with and without Registered or Treaty Indian status.
29. Training, Education, Experience and Responsibility category 2 occupations require either: completion of a postsecondary education program of two to three years at community college, institute of technology or CÉGEP; completion of an apprenticeship training program of two to five years; occupations with supervisory or significant safety (e.g. police officers and firefighters) responsibilities; or, several years of experience in a related occupation from TEER 3 (when applicable).
30. For those with an education at the bachelor's level or above, the share in professional occupations was 56.1% for First Nations people with Registered or Treaty Indian status and 52.0% for First Nations people without Registered or Treaty Indian status.
31. Canadian-born describes persons who are not, or have not been, a landed immigrant, a permanent resident or a non-permanent resident.
32. A person is overqualified if they have a bachelor's degree or higher and are working in an occupation that typically requires at most a high school diploma. This refers to occupations in Training, Education, Experience and Responsibilities (TEER) categories 4 or 5 in the National Occupational Classification 2021. People in managerial occupations (TEER 0) are excluded from the calculation.
33. Among First Nations people with a bachelor's degree or higher, the overqualification rate was 8.5% for those with Registered or Treaty Indian status and 11.5% for those without Registered or Treaty Indian status.
34. Cornelissen & Turcotte (2020) and Statistics Canada (2023b).
35. Arriagada (2021).
36. Statistics Canada (2022c) and Statistics Canada (2017b).
37. Statistics Canada (2022d).
38. Statistics Canada (2022b).
39. For more information on incompletely enumerated Indian reserves and Indian settlements, please refer to Appendix 1.5 of the Guide to the Census of Population, 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2022c).
40. See Alasia et al. (2017) and Statistics Canada (2023c).
41. See Subedi et al. (2020). For the 2021 update of the classification of remoteness index, data and documentation are available upon request from the Centre for Health Data Integration of Health Statistics Branch at Statistics Canada (hd-ds@statcan.gc.ca).
42. Statistics Canada (2022e).

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