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Far from home: High school completion for First Nations people, Métis, and Inuit in remote communities, 2016 to 2021

by Jaclyn Layton

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INSIGHTS ON CANADIAN SOCIETY



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Overview of the study

Indigenous peoples are more likely than non-Indigenous people to live in rural and remote communities. Previous research has found that improved access to services within one's community is linked to improved education outcomes. Using census data, this article demonstrates that between 2016 and 2021, the accessibility of one's community remained an influential factor for having completed high school for First Nations people, Métis, and Inuit.

Introduction

In pursuit of reconciliation for Indigenous peoples in Canada, the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* has called for equitable access to jobs, training, and education opportunities.¹ However, historical legacies such as residential schools, intergenerational trauma, and the lack of culturally relevant curricula have contributed

to lower educational attainment levels among First Nations people, Métis, and Inuit compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts. Further, education is not universally accessible for many Indigenous people. First Nations and Inuit youth are less likely to have a high school within their community, requiring those individuals to leave their communities in pursuit of an education at a young age.²

Previous research has indicated that improving access to education within one's own community is an important factor in decreasing the gap between First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and non-Indigenous educational attainment, after controlling for other relevant factors.³

This article uses the 2021 Census of Population and [Index of Remoteness](#)⁴ to examine to what extent the remoteness of one's community still acts as a barrier to education compared to 2016. Insights from this analysis can be used to inform future research and develop evidence-based programs and policies aimed at eliminating the existing education gap. However,

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INSIGHTS ON CANADIAN SOCIETY

high school completion alone may not fully capture educational success for First Nations people, Métis, and Inuit. Additional factors, such as Indigenous language efficacy and connection to traditional activities are relevant and contribute to overall well-being and success.

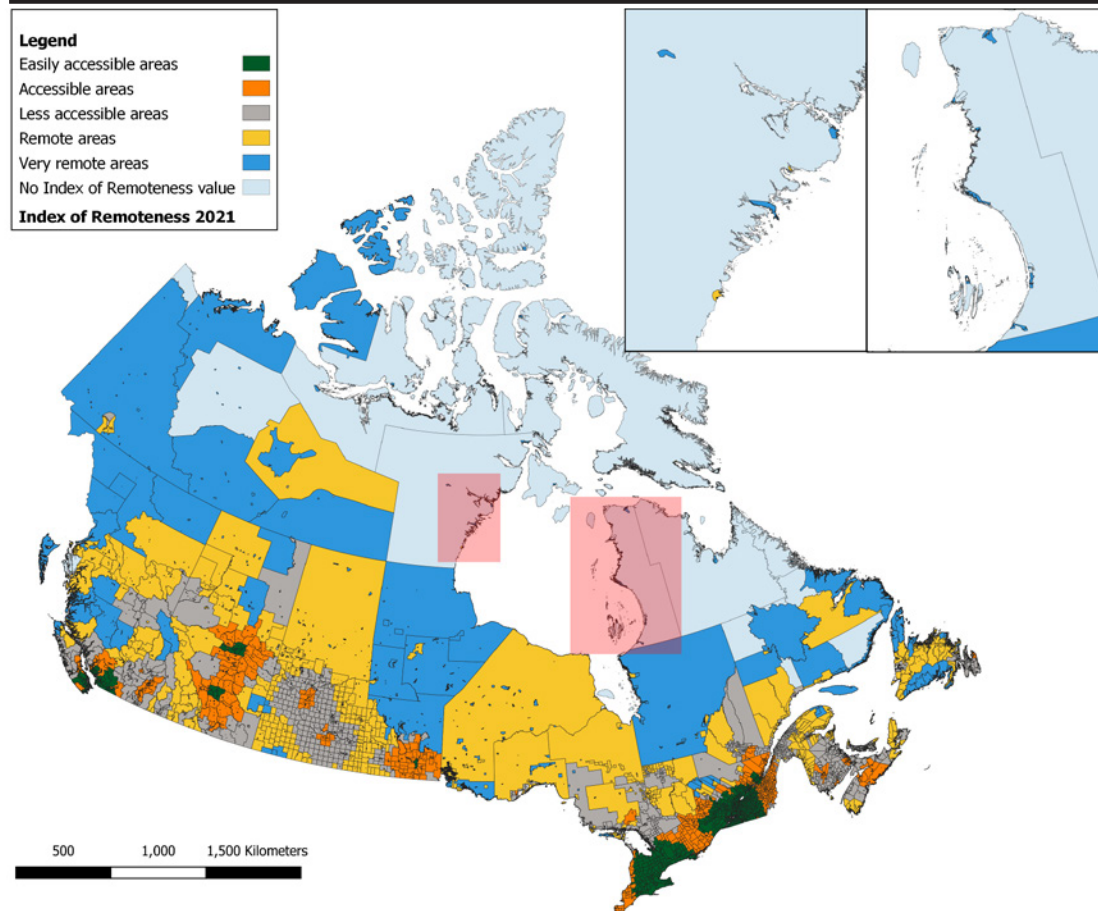
Inuit and First Nations people continued to be more likely to live in remote areas, compared with Métis and non-Indigenous people

Indigenous peoples are more likely than non-Indigenous people to live in rural and remote communities. Many remote communities have deep cultural ties and have existed for many thousands of years. Alternatively, for some First Nations people

and Inuit, these settlement patterns are linked to their historical relocation by the Canadian government.⁵ Today, remote communities incur high costs in the provision of essential services, including education, resulting in outdated infrastructure, poor retention of school staff and higher staff turnover rates.⁶ There is also a digital divide between Inuit Nunangat and the rest of Canada, as Inuit households within Inuit Nunangat are less likely to have access to internet compared to Inuit households outside of Inuit Nunangat.⁷ In addition, if students must travel long distances to attend high school, transportation options such as walking, public transit, and parent-provided transportation may not be available.

Map 1 shows the remoteness of [Census subdivisions \(CSDs\)](#) across Canada in 2021. While the majority of Canada's landmass was classified as remote or very remote, 75% of all Canadians aged 19 to 45 lived in easily accessible areas, an increase from 2016 (71%).

Map 1
Relative remoteness of census subdivisions in Canada, using the Index of Remoteness, 2021

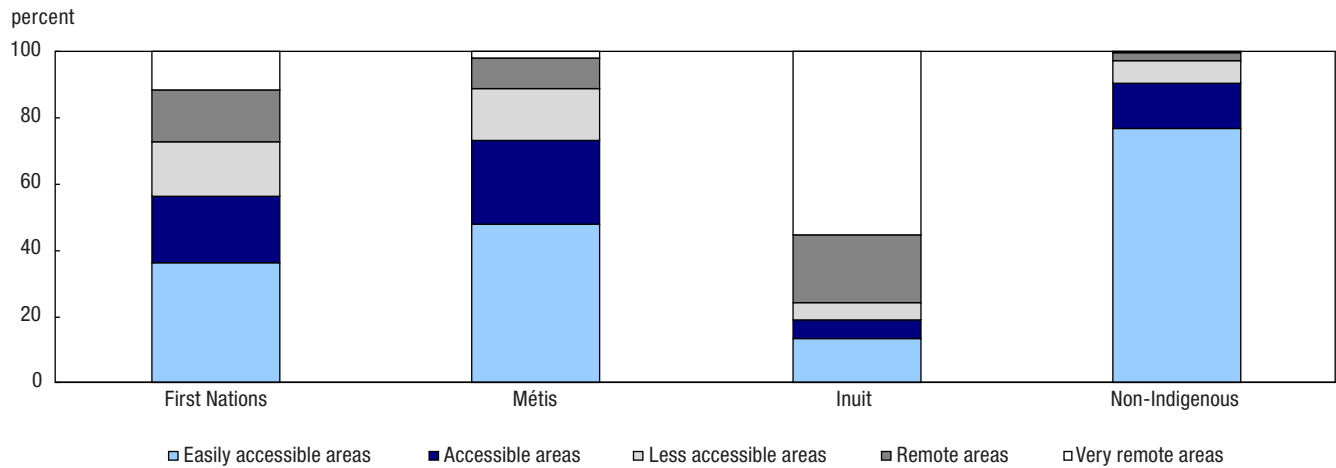


Sources: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021; Index of Remoteness, 2021.

In 2021, the proportion of First Nations people (27%), Métis (11%), and Inuit (76%) living in areas classified as “remote” or “very remote” (Chart 1) was higher

than that of non-Indigenous people (3%). However, these shares decreased slightly for First Nations people and Inuit since 2016 (-4 percentage points).

Chart 1
Accessibility of one's community, by Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous people, 2021



Note: The population includes those aged 19 to 45.
Sources: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021; Index of Remoteness, 2021.

High school completion increased for most First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and non-Indigenous people in remote communities between 2016 and 2021

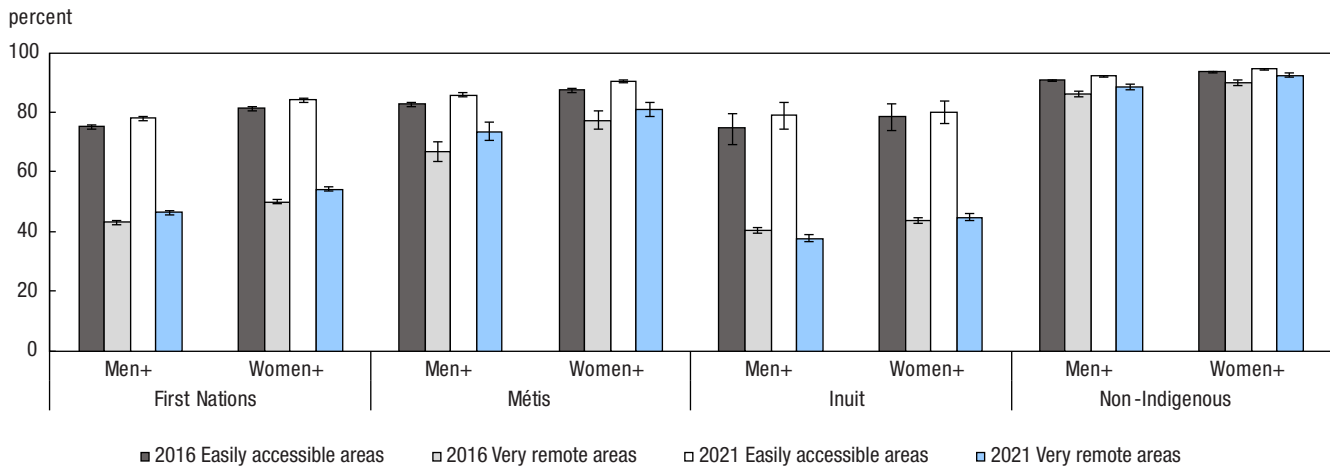
In 2021 and 2016, First Nations people and Inuit were more likely to have completed high school in easily accessible areas versus very remote areas. While this holds true for Métis and non-Indigenous people, the difference is less pronounced. Over the same five-year period, the share of First Nations people, Métis and Inuit women, and non-Indigenous people having

completed high school in very remote areas increased slightly (Chart 2). However, for some groups, larger increases were observed.

Métis men, for instance, saw a significant increase in high school completion for those living in the most remote areas. Three-quarters (74%) of Métis men in very remote areas had completed high school in 2021, up from two-thirds (67%) in 2016 (Chart 2). Those in easily accessible areas also saw an increase, from 2016 (83%) to 2021 (86%) (Chart 2).

In contrast, the only group that saw a decrease in high school completion was Inuit men living in very remote areas, where the share decreased from 40% in 2016 to 38% in 2021 (Chart 2).

Chart 2
High school completion, by Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous people and accessibility of one's community, 2016 and 2021



Notes: 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 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. Error bars represent the 95% confidence interval.

Sources: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016 and 2021; Index of Remoteness, 2016 and 2021.

Living in an accessible area and in a higher income household remained important factors for high school completion for First Nations people, Métis and Inuit

In 2021, the accessibility of one’s community remained an influential factor for high school completion for First Nations people aged 19 to 45.⁸ For First Nations people residing in an easily accessible area, relative to a very remote area, the odds of having completed high school were two and a half times as high (odds ratio (OR) 2.5).⁹ A similar result was observed for Métis (OR 2.6). For Inuit, the odds of having completed high school nearly doubled for those living in easily

accessible areas compared to very remote areas (OR 1.9).¹⁰

The second most important factor related to high school completion was household income. The odds of having completed high school were twice as high for First Nations people (OR 2.0), Métis (OR 2.2) and Inuit (OR 2.4) living in higher incomes households, relative to those living in low-income households (after-tax). Notably, the association between living in low-income and high school completion was lower in 2021 than 2016.

For the non-Indigenous population, the accessibility of one’s community (OR 2.2) and living above the low-income threshold (after-tax) (OR 2.1) were also important contributors to high school completion in 2021.

Conclusion

For First Nations people, Métis and Inuit, improved access to education is related to educational success.

The share of First Nations people and Inuit living in remote and very remote communities was relatively high in 2021 (27% and 76%, respectively). One in ten (11%) Métis shared this characteristic, compared with only 3 percent of the non-Indigenous population.

In 2016, the relative accessibility of one's community was an important factor for whether First Nations people, Métis, and Inuit had completed high school. In 2021, this relationship remained significant, even while controlling for other factors such as financial

security, housing suitability, personal and household characteristics.

Living in an easily accessible area, relative to a very remote area, more than doubled the odds of having completed high school for First Nations people and Métis, and nearly doubled those odds for Inuit. Additionally, living above the low-income threshold had a significant impact on high school completion. These factors are interwoven, as youth who leave home to attend high school may bear a financial and emotional cost.¹¹

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Data sources, methods and limitations

Data are from the long-form [2016 and 2021 Census of Population](#) and the [Index of Remoteness](#).

The population of interest is people aged 19 to 45 in four distinct categories: single identity First Nations people living on and off reserve, Inuit, Métis, and non-Indigenous people.

Separate logistic regression models were constructed for First Nations people, Métis, Inuit, and non-Indigenous people, using 2016 and 2021 data.¹² Whether an individual had their high school diploma (or equivalent) was the dependent variable. Independent variables include gender, low-income status (after-tax), parental status, province of residence, residence on/off reserve, residence in/out of Inuit Nunangat, measures of housing suitability, and household characteristics. Where possible, model parameters remained consistent from 2016 to 2021. However, as new information is available with the 2021 Census of Population, model results are not directly comparable.

In 2021, there were 63 incompletely enumerated reserves and settlements, up from 14 in 2016. Population counts are not available for these reserves and settlements and are not included in 2021 Census tabulations. While the impact of the missing data for higher-level geographic areas is small, the impact can be significant for lower-level geographies such as Census subdivisions (CSDs) and for areas considered "on reserve", as the incompletely enumerated population will account for a larger proportion of the population.

This analysis is limited to the observable characteristics included in the 2021 Census of Population, excluding factors that could be relevant for Indigenous people, such as a family history of residential school attendance. Further, the outcome measured in this study is whether an individual has earned their high school diploma (or equivalent). This measure may not account for those who may start, stop, and continue their education later in life. Additionally, this measure may not fully encompass educational success for First Nations people, Métis, and Inuit, which may also include measures of Indigenous language efficacy and connection to traditional activities.

Notes

1. See the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015).
2. See National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health (2017).
3. See Layton (2023).
4. The Index of Remoteness is highly correlated with measures of accessibility, indicating that the index is a reasonable approximation for the availability of services, including retail business, healthcare, and education facilities. See Alasia et al. (2017).
5. Some First Nations communities were relocated from agriculturally valuable or resource-rich land onto remote and economically marginal reserves. Additionally, in 1953, the Canadian government undertook a relocation program that transferred Inuit from communities in Arctic Quebec and Baffin Island further north, where living conditions were difficult. See the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1994).
6. See Sisco et al. (2012).
7. See Statistics Canada (2017).
8. See Statistics Canada (2022).
9. The accessibility of one's community (OR 2.5) appeared to be a stronger determinant of having completed high school than living off reserve (OR 1.6).
10. Inuit living outside of Inuit Nunangat were more likely to have completed high school (OR 1.9) relative to those inside Inuit Nunangat. However, Inuit living in Inuit Nunangat may benefit from a strong sense of cultural connectedness, which is linked to improved outcomes. See Oster et al. (2014).
11. See Frenette (2002).
12. This article improves upon the methodology in *Distance as a Factor for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit High School Completion* (2023), and therefore results are not comparable.

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