

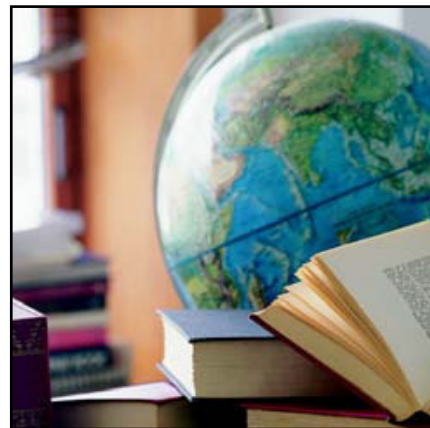
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## Education Indicators in Canada: Fact Sheet

# First Nations youth: Experiences and outcomes in secondary and postsecondary learning

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# Education Indicators in Canada: Fact Sheet

Jaclyn Layton  
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## First Nations youth: Experiences and outcomes in secondary and postsecondary learning

Quality, culturally appropriate, and accessible education is essential to the preservation and prosperity of First Nations communities.<sup>1</sup> However, as reported by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the legacy of residential schools, inadequate funding, and the absence of culturally relevant curricula has had a profound impact on the educational success of First Nations youth, particularly those living on reserve.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, First Nations people<sup>3</sup> have strongly advocated for an equitable education system that provides adequate support throughout all stages of lifelong learning.

First Nations youth often take different educational pathways than non-Indigenous youth, as they are more likely to be young parents, live in low-income households, and live in rural areas than their non-Indigenous counterparts.<sup>4</sup> As a result, First Nations youth may face additional challenges to acquiring further education, such as poorer access to educational institutions on reserve.<sup>5</sup>

This fact sheet presents 2016 Census data on the educational participation of First Nations youth aged 19 to 30,<sup>6</sup> in conjunction with characteristics that may affect their educational experience.<sup>7</sup> This study is guided by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, which recognizes the importance of equitable education in the success of Indigenous peoples and has called for regular reporting on the educational attainment of Indigenous peoples in Canada compared with non-Indigenous people.<sup>8</sup>

1 Assembly of First Nations (2018).

2 Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015), Arriagada (2021), Chichekian and Bragoli-Barzan (2021).

3 Respondents self-identified as First Nations in the 2016 Census. In this paper, First Nations people refers to both First Nations people with registered Indian status (Status Indians) and First Nations people without registered Indian status (non-Status Indians).

4 The **low-income measure, after tax**, refers to a fixed percentage (50%) of median adjusted after-tax income of private households. The household after-tax income is adjusted by an equivalence scale to take economies of scale into account. This adjustment for different household sizes reflects the fact that a household's needs increase, but at a decreasing rate, as the number of members increases. Low-income status (after tax) is based on the 2020 income threshold, which is suitable for the population residing on reserve. However, caution should be used when applying low-income concepts to certain geographic areas or to certain populations. The existence of substantial in-kind transfers (such as subsidized housing), economies based on sharing and consumption from own production (such as products from hunting, farming, or fishing), differences in cost of living and expenditure patterns, challenges in collection such as non-response and incomplete enumeration of reserves must be considered when interpreting low-income statistics.

5 Indspire (2019), Zarifa et al. (2017).

6 In this paper, "youth" refers to individuals aged 19-30, which was identified as the core educational years by the Assembly of First Nations.

7 The first outcome measured in this study is limited to whether a person has completed a high school or secondary school diploma, graduation certificate, or equivalency certificate. Secondary school (high school) diploma or graduation certificate includes academic or vocational high school diplomas or certificates as may be obtained by graduating from a secondary school. High school equivalency certificate includes the successful completion of a high school equivalency test such as the General Educational Development (GED) test or obtaining an Adult Basic Education (ABE) certificate where it is equivalent to the completion of secondary school.

The second outcome measured in this study is postsecondary participation, which includes youth who had a postsecondary level of education at the time the data were collected or those who attended a postsecondary educational institution in the nine-month data collection period. These youth are considered as having begun or completed a postsecondary education program. However, these are not necessarily typical measures of success for First Nations people, which instead include measures of ancestral language efficacy and exposure to festivals and ceremonies. See the [Assembly of First Nations \(2007\)](#).

8 "We call upon all levels of government to provide annual reports or any current data requested by the National Council for Reconciliation so that it can report on the progress towards reconciliation. The reports or data would include, but not be limited to the educational and income attainments of Indigenous peoples in Canada compared with non-Indigenous people."

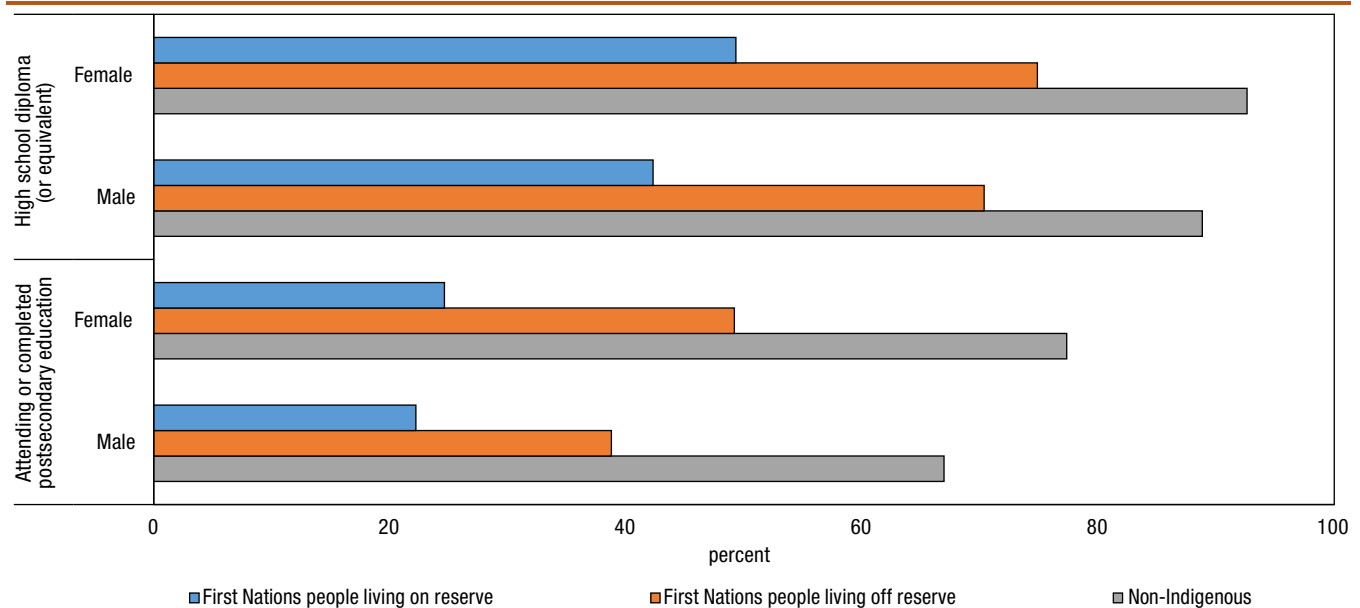
## Non-Indigenous youth aged 19 to 30 were much more likely to graduate high school than First Nations youth

Overall educational engagement was higher for non-Indigenous youth than for First Nations youth, in terms of both high school completion and postsecondary participation (i.e., having either completed a postsecondary credential, or having attended postsecondary school in the 2015/2016 school year).

Just under two-thirds (63%) of all First Nations youth had completed high school, compared with 91% of the non-Indigenous population. First Nations youth living off reserve were more likely to obtain their high school diploma (73%) than First Nations youth living on reserve (46%). The latter result is likely linked to access, as nearly half of First Nations students do not have access to a high school on reserve, requiring them to leave their community to pursue education.<sup>9,10</sup>

This pattern continued into postsecondary education, as non-Indigenous youth were nearly twice as likely (72%) to have completed or recently attended a postsecondary program as First Nations youth (37%). Moreover, among First Nations youth, those living off-reserve were nearly twice as likely to have participated in postsecondary education (44%) as those living on reserve (23%). Both First Nations and non-Indigenous women were more likely to have attained their high school diploma and participated in postsecondary education than their male counterparts, with the exception of postsecondary participation for those living on reserve.

**Chart 1**  
**In 2016, First Nations youth residing off reserve were more likely to complete high school and participate in postsecondary than First Nations youth residing on reserve**



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population 2016.

9 Assembly of First Nations (2007).

10 Access to high school and postsecondary is limited for those living on reserve. As a result, First Nations youth must leave their communities to pursue education. Accordingly, employment opportunities on reserve may be limited, requiring First Nations youth to reside off reserve to participate in the labour market. The relatively high educational attainment of First Nations youth living off reserve likely reflects both differences in completion rates between different sub-populations, as well as the impacts of migration from reserve for those with higher educational attainment.

## Differences in high school completion between First Nations and non-Indigenous people were smallest in the Atlantic provinces and largest in the Prairies

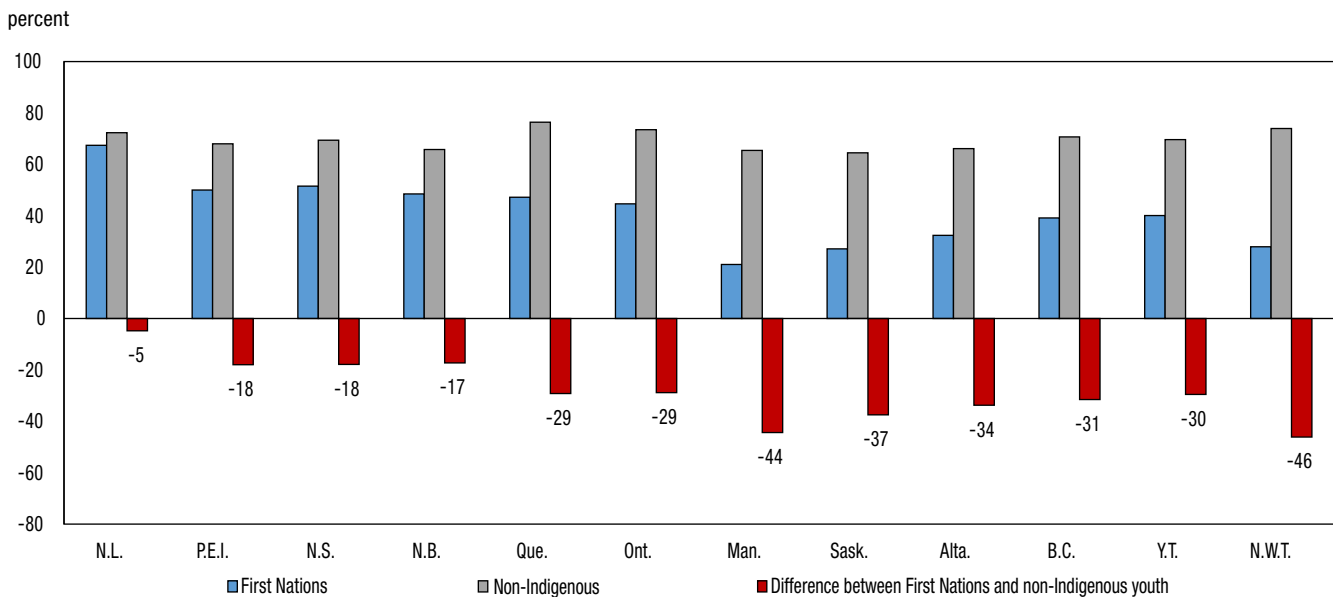
In terms of both high school completion and postsecondary participation, differences in educational attainment between First Nations and non-Indigenous youth were largest in the Prairie provinces and smallest in the Atlantic provinces. First Nations postsecondary participation, for instance, is three times higher in Newfoundland and Labrador (67%) than in Manitoba (21%).

However, this result is likely due to the relatively large proportion of First Nations youth residing on reserve in Manitoba (48%), Saskatchewan (46%), and Alberta (34%) relative to the Canadian average (33%). These provinces are characterized by the largest difference in postsecondary participation between First Nations and non-Indigenous youth (44-percentage points, 37-percentage-point, and 33-percentage-points, respectively).

Conversely, First Nations youth make up a small share of the young population in Newfoundland and Labrador (7%) and Prince Edward Island (2%) where an even smaller share of First Nations people lived on reserve (11% and 28%, respectively). The overall gap in postsecondary participation between First Nations and non-Indigenous youth in these provinces are also smaller (5-percentage-points and 18-percentage-points, respectively).

**Chart 2**

**In 2016, Manitoba had the largest difference in postsecondary participation between First Nations and non-Indigenous youth**



**Note:** Provinces/territories with less than 100 observations are excluded.  
**Source:** Statistics Canada, Census of Population 2016.

## Financial and geographical challenges were negatively associated with high school completion and postsecondary participation

First Nations youth differ in many ways from other youth in Canada: as of 2016, they were more likely to be young parents, live in low-income households, and live in rural areas than their non-Indigenous counterparts (Chart 5). Additionally, First Nations youth are likely to speak an Indigenous language as their first language. This may contribute to cultural connectedness which can be a protective factor for First Nations youth, as they may benefit from a stronger link to their culture, tradition, language, and land.<sup>11</sup> These characteristics are factors in the high school and postsecondary education experiences and outcomes of First Nations youth.<sup>12</sup>

One-third (33%) of First Nations youth lived on reserve,<sup>13</sup> where these characteristics are more pronounced. On reserve, nearly half (48%) of First Nations women aged 19 to 30 were parents, as were one quarter (26%) of men. Young men and women with children face additional costs and responsibilities of raising children, potentially impacting their decision to attend school or join the labour market. Additionally, half (48%) of First Nations youth living on reserve were living in low-income households (after tax). Previous studies have established that youth from low-income households tend to have lower levels of educational attainment, as they face additional constraints to participating in education.<sup>14</sup> For example, youth from low-income households tend to have less access to high-quality schools and extra-curricular programs, which positively impact educational outcomes.<sup>15</sup>

More than eight in ten (83%) of First Nations youth who lived on reserve were in rural areas, while 18% of First Nations youth who lived off reserve were in rural areas. In comparison, just over 1 in 10 (13%) non-Indigenous youth live in rural areas. Those residing in rural areas tend to have access to fewer essential services, including health care and educational facilities.<sup>16</sup> This is the case for many First Nations youth, as 70% of First Nations communities had fewer than 500 inhabitants.<sup>17</sup> Due to their relatively low population density, smaller communities may have to rely on larger urban centres to access education. This commute can be distant and costly, impacting participation in education.<sup>18</sup>

Although the remoteness of living on reserve poses challenges in accessing services, it does afford opportunities to connect with community and culture through language. Overall, just over one in ten (12%) of First Nations youth spoke an Indigenous language as their first language.<sup>19</sup> Approximately one third (30%) of First Nations people living on reserve spoke an Indigenous language as their first, a much larger proportion than those residing off reserve (3%).

These characteristics intersect with one another – ultimately influencing the context of learning and, subsequently, the educational outcomes of First Nations youth.

11 [Bleakney and Melvin \(2022\)](#), Assembly of First Nations (2012), Oster et al. (2020).

12 [Uppal \(2017\)](#), Lefebvre and Merrigan (2008).

13 There are 634 First Nation communities (also known as reserves) in Canada, with First Nations governments. See the Assembly of First Nations (2022).

14 Finnie et al. (2012).

15 Frenette (2007).

16 [Bleakney and Melvin \(2022\)](#).

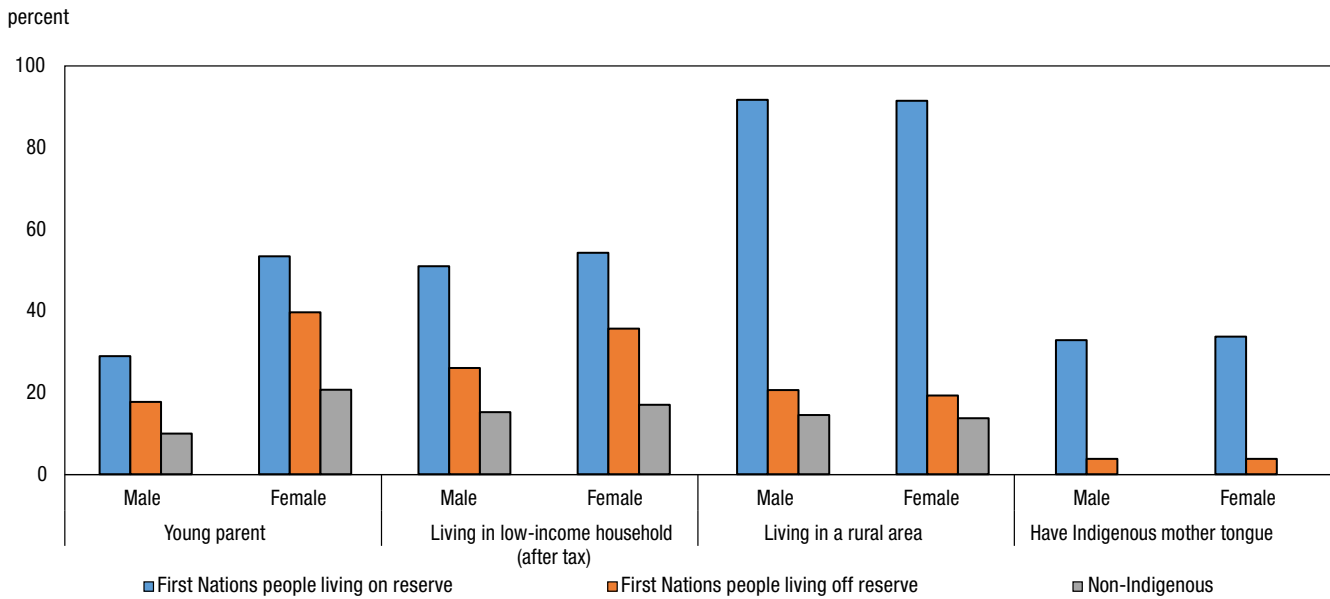
17 [Assembly of First Nations \(2022\)](#).

18 [Bleakney and Melvin \(2022\)](#).

19 Engagement with First Nations youth has consistently indicated the importance of First Nation language, culture, and history to education. See Indigenous Services Canada (2017).

**Chart 3**

**In 2016, First Nations youth residing on reserve were more likely to be young parents, live in low-income households, live in a rural area, and to speak an Indigenous language as their first**



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population 2016.

Generally, high school completion and postsecondary participation are lower for those who face these additional challenges in accessing education (e.g., financial, familial, or geographical). A larger share of First Nations youth, relative to non-Indigenous youth, faced these challenges, which are negatively associated with high school completion and postsecondary participation. Nonetheless, First Nations women consistently had higher educational participation than First Nations men, despite being more likely than men to be young parents and living in low-income.

**Table 1**  
**First Nations youth who were not young parents, not living in low-income, and not living in a rural area were more likely to engage in education**

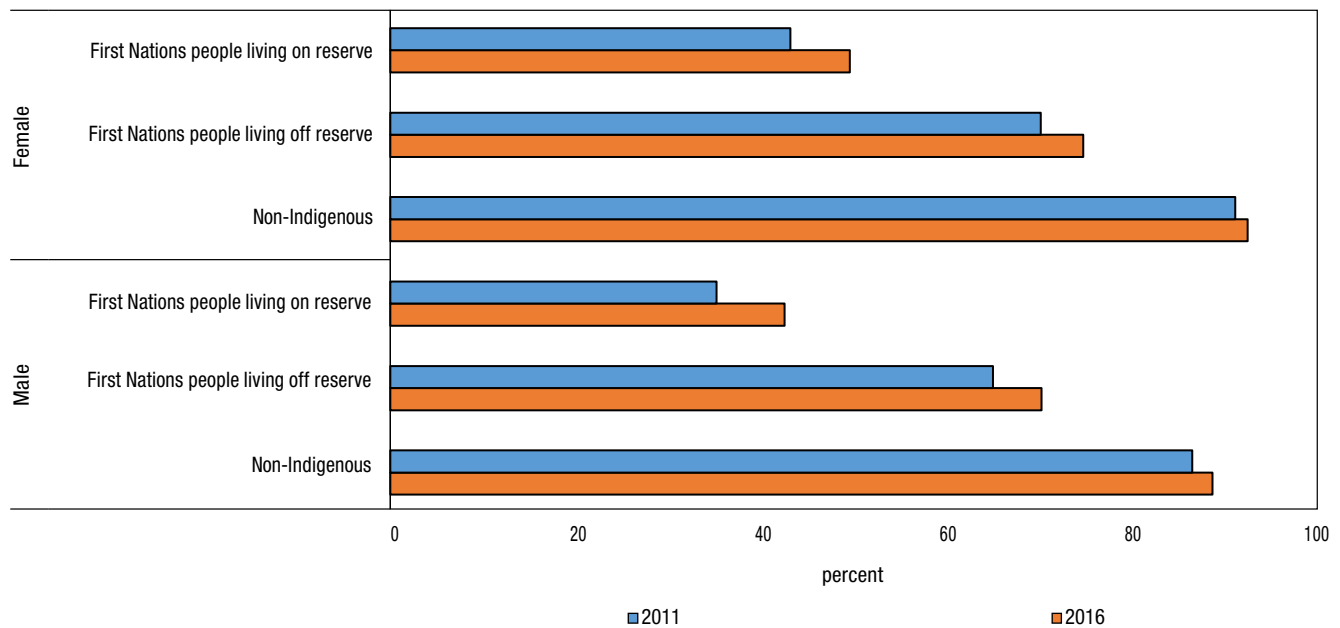
	High school diploma (or equivalent)		Attending or completed postsecondary education	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
	percent			
Young parents	49.08	57.18	29.84	32.62
Non-parents	63.45	73.36	33.80	47.46
Living in low-income households	44.09	52.26	21.87	27.40
Not living in low-income households	68.21	75.67	38.15	50.02
Living in a rural area	50.39	57.59	27.01	31.48
Not living in a rural area	67.86	72.62	37.28	47.73

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population 2016.

## High school completion and postsecondary participation for First Nations youth are increasing over time<sup>20</sup>

First Nations youth have similar hopes and aspirations for formal education as non-Indigenous youth.<sup>21</sup> Over time, overall high school completion has increased, more so for First Nations youth than for non-Indigenous youth. For example, while First Nation men had the lowest level of high school completion in 2011 (35%), they saw the greatest increases between 2011 and 2016 (+8-percentage-points). First Nations youth living on reserve have also seen the greatest increase in postsecondary participation, compared with 2011 (+3-percentage-points).

**Chart 4**  
**First Nations men living on reserve have seen the largest increase in high school completion between 2011 and 2016**



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population 2016; Census of Population 2011.

## Postsecondary participation for First Nations people increased by 8-percentage-points when including individuals aged up to 46

First Nations people participate in a practice of lifelong learning, and as a result, may take alternative pathways to education.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, the age of thirty may be too early to determine if an individual will finish high school or participate in postsecondary education. When expanding the analysis to include a larger age range of First Nations individuals (i.e., aged 19 to 46), high school completion rates and postsecondary participation rates increased for First Nations people, particularly those living on reserve. This was not observed for non-Indigenous people in this age range.

20 Only the reserves and settlements that participated in all comparison years are included. Historical comparisons should be interpreted with caution. The change (increase or decrease) in the number of people reporting Indigenous group, Registered or Treaty Indian status, or First Nation or Indian band membership is partly caused by demographic growth, and partly caused by changes in reporting patterns between Indigenous groups and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations.

Changes in Indigenous counts over time can also be affected by differences in the wording and format of Indigenous questions, legislative changes, differences in the set of incompletely enumerated reserves, and changes made to the definition of reserves.

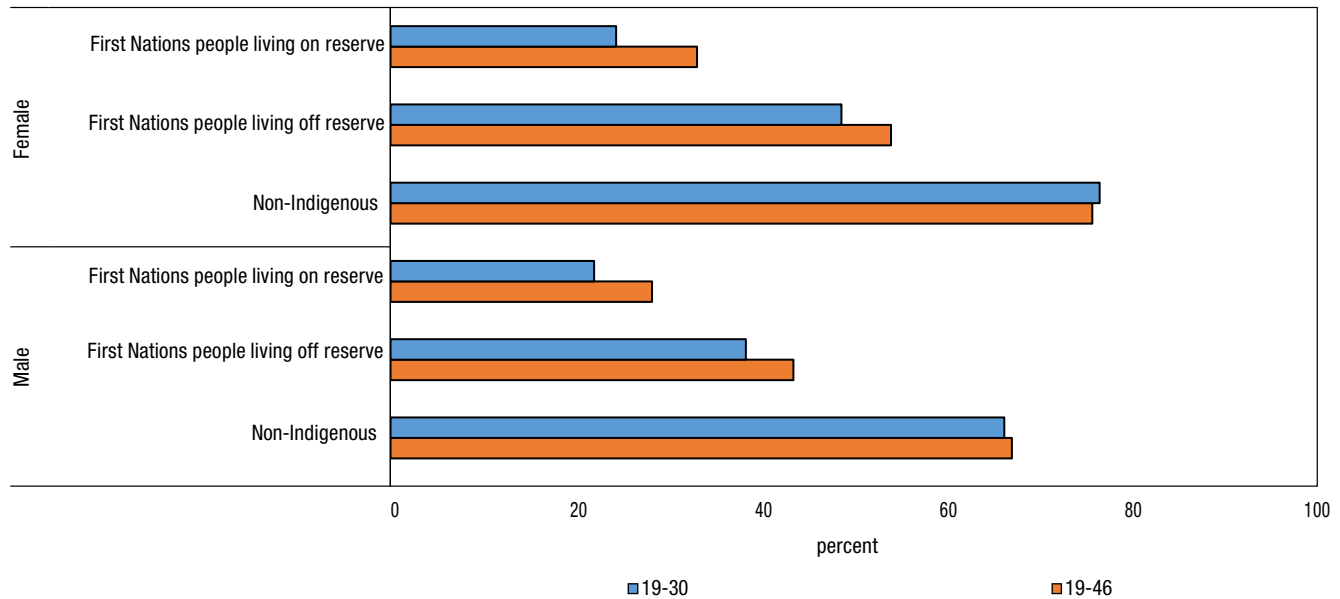
21 Assembly of First Nations (2010).

22 A survey conducted by the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation found that 70% of First Nations youth aged 16 to 24 living on reserve hope to participate in some form of postsecondary. See the [Canadian Council on Learning \(2007\) and Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation \(2005\)](#).



Notably, overall postsecondary participation for First Nations people on reserve was 8-percentage-points higher when considering individuals aged 19 to 46, versus 19 to 30 years. Conversely, postsecondary participation for non-Indigenous individuals remained within 1 percentage point of the narrower age range.

**Chart 5**  
**Postsecondary participation was 8 percentage points higher for First Nations youth living on reserve when including a larger age range**



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population 2016.

## Conclusion

There are many factors that affect an individual’s ability to pursue their education. First Nations youth are more likely than non-Indigenous youth to be young parents, live in low-income (after-tax) households, and live in rural areas. A greater proportion of First Nations youth living on reserve face financial and geographical challenges, resulting in a larger disparity in educational attainment relative to non-Indigenous youth. Additionally, the legacy of colonialism, inadequate funding, lack of access to educational facilities on reserve, culturally irrelevant curricula and the impact of intergenerational trauma are determinants of education that cannot be ignored,<sup>23</sup> although their direct effect is beyond the scope of this analysis.

In 2016, consistently, First Nations women engaged in education at higher levels than First Nations men, despite representing a larger share of those who were young parents and lived in low-income households. Further examination of the experiences of First Nations men is necessary to understand their relatively lower levels of educational engagement and to provide subsequent solutions. However, both First Nations men and women were found to pursue education later into life compared with non-Indigenous people. This information can inform the supports offered to First Nations youth to be inclusive of lifelong learners.

This study provides a profile of characteristics that are relevant to the learning context of First Nations youth. However, other research questions remain, including: do students have access to education in their community? Do student parents have support for childcare while completing their studies? Do students have adequate funding from their bands? These questions are relevant for policy makers, particularly in attempting to identify persistent barriers and offer support for First Nations students living on reserve. Finally, measures of success as defined by First Nations, such as ancestral language efficacy and cultural connectedness could be explored and reported on.

<sup>23</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015).

With the release of the 2021 Census of Population, these indicators can be replicated to assess how First Nations educational engagement has evolved over the past five years. The ongoing reporting of these education indicators is paramount in ensuring First Nations youth have adequate supports in their educational endeavours.

### The future of First Nations education

First Nations students have the inherent and Treaty right to receive education that is in accordance with their culture, values, traditions, and languages and that is free of prejudice and discrimination. Quality and culturally appropriate education are a cornerstone to the preservation and vitality of First Nations societies and to the realization of other fundamental human rights of First Nations students.

First Nations organizations have identified the following measures to facilitate improved education outcomes for youth: funding targeted to First Nations needs and circumstances, consideration of First Nations children’s cultural, linguistic, and geographical needs and historical realities; providing agency for First Nations in the education system in all stages of lifelong learning to foster increased First Nations enrollment, retention, and graduation rates.

In 2019, the federal government replaced its proposal-based education programs with regional education approaches and funding models. First Nations are now able to develop their own local, regional and/ or Treaty based education agreements that enable the implementation of their vision for First Nations education. In 2021, seven Regional Education Agreements (REA) have been signed and concluded, three are near completion, and 46 REAs are underway.

**Source:** Assembly of First Nations, 2022.

### Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the contribution of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) to this paper. Their knowledge, guidance and feedback are greatly appreciated.

## Appendix

**Table A.1**  
**Proportion of youth aged 19 to 30 by educational experience, Indigenous identity, geography, and sex at birth, 2016**

	High school diploma (or equivalent)			Attending or completed postsecondary education		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
	percent					
First Nations people living on reserve	42.30	49.31	45.72	22.21	24.62	23.37
First Nations people living off reserve	70.35	74.85	72.72	38.77	49.19	44.26
Non-Indigenous	88.82	92.62	90.70	66.94	77.34	72.08

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

**Table A.2**  
**Population and proportion of First Nations Peoples aged 19 to 30 by province, 2016**

	Population of First Nations Peoples	Total population	Proportion of First Nations Peoples
	number		percent
Newfoundland and Labrador	4,655	67,060	7
Prince Edward Island	410	19,365	2
Nova Scotia	5,115	129,665	4
New Brunswick	3,225	95,390	3
Quebec	16,040	1,177,820	1
Ontario	45,075	2,101,065	2
Manitoba	24,795	202,660	12
Saskatchewan	22,385	173,440	13
Alberta	27,855	677,215	4
British Columbia	32,170	701,360	5
Yukon	1,160	5,330	22
Northwest Territories	2,630	7,630	34
Nunavut	50	7,370	1
Total	185,575	5,365,375	3

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population 2016.

**Table A.3**  
**Proportion of individuals aged 19 to 30 by educational experience, Indigenous identity, and province/territory, 2016**

	First Nations	Non-Indigenous
	percent	
<b>High school diploma or equivalent</b>		
Newfoundland and Labrador	85.61	91.50
Prince Edward Island	87.80	94.23
Nova Scotia	79.77	92.26
New Brunswick	82.95	92.87
Quebec	54.77	85.13
Ontario	70.27	92.48
Manitoba	49.67	92.35
Saskatchewan	58.25	92.45
Alberta	56.58	90.52
British Columbia	72.88	93.58
Yukon	67.67	92.47
Northwest Territories	55.89	92.96
<b>Postsecondary participation</b>		
Newfoundland and Labrador	67.45	72.26
Prince Edward Island	50.00	68.01
Nova Scotia	51.52	69.35
New Brunswick	48.53	65.74
Quebec	47.19	76.41
Ontario	44.59	73.46
Manitoba	21.05	65.42
Saskatchewan	27.07	64.49
Alberta	32.35	66.08
British Columbia	39.17	70.64
Yukon	40.09	69.64
Northwest Territories	27.95	73.99

Note: Provinces/territories with less than 100 observations are excluded.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population 2016.

**Table A.4**

**Distribution of characteristics identified as barriers to education for First Nations youth aged 19 to 30, by geography and sex at birth, 2016**

	First Nations people living on reserve		First Nations people living off reserve		Non-Indigenous	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
	percent					
Young parent	26.51	48.91	16.26	36.33	9.16	19.00
Living in a low-income household (after tax)	46.68	49.70	23.88	32.70	13.92	15.59
Living in a rural area	83.98	83.82	18.93	17.69	13.32	12.60
Living in a population centre	16.02	16.18	81.07	82.31	86.68	87.40
Have Indigenous mother tongue	30.07	30.92	3.47	3.43	...	...

... not applicable

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population 2016.

**Table A.5**

**Proportion of individuals aged 19 to 30 by educational experience, Indigenous identity, geography, and sex at birth, 2011 and 2016**

	2011		2016		Difference between cycles		Cycle-over-cycle percent change	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
	percent							
<b>High school diploma (or equivalent)</b>								
First Nations people living on reserve	35.23	43.22	42.59	49.64	7.36	6.41	20.88	14.84
First Nations people living off reserve	65.12	70.26	70.35	74.85	5.23	4.59	8.04	6.53
Non-Indigenous	86.63	91.29	88.82	92.62	2.20	1.34	2.53	1.46
<b>Attending or completed postsecondary education</b>								
First Nations people living on reserve	19.31	21.50	22.24	24.60	2.93	3.09	15.19	14.38
First Nations people living off reserve	38.23	47.66	38.77	49.19	0.54	1.53	1.40	3.21
Non-Indigenous	65.93	75.96	66.94	77.34	1.01	1.39	1.53	1.82

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population 2016; Census of Population 2011.

**Table A.6**

**Proportion of individuals aged 19-30 and 19-46 by educational experience, Indigenous identity, geography, and sex at birth, 2016**

	19-30		19-46		Difference between cycles		Cycle-over-cycle percent change	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
	percent							
<b>High school diploma (or equivalent)</b>								
First Nations people living on reserve	42.30	49.31	43.09	53.43	0.79	4.12	1.87	8.35
First Nations people living off reserve	70.35	74.85	69.91	76.46	-0.44	1.61	-0.63	2.16
Non-Indigenous	88.82	92.62	88.33	92.18	-0.49	-0.44	-0.56	-0.47
<b>Attending or completed postsecondary education</b>								
First Nations people living on reserve	22.21	24.62	28.54	33.43	6.33	8.81	28.50	35.81
First Nations people living off reserve	38.77	49.19	43.94	54.59	5.18	5.40	13.36	10.98
Non-Indigenous	66.94	77.34	67.77	76.56	0.83	-0.78	1.24	-1.01

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population 2016.