



## Registered Indian Mobility and Migration: An Analysis of 1996 Census Data



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**Abstract**

It is generally thought that the growth of the Canadian urban Aboriginal population is due to the movement of Registered Indians from reserves to cities. This paper is an examination of migration and residential mobility patterns, to and from reserves, for Registered Indians. Data from the 1996 Census are used to examine these patterns. Age and gender-specific migration and mobility patterns are examined and comparisons are made between Registered Indians and other Aboriginal groups as well as to the general Canadian population. Contrasts are also made between one and five year mobility patterns. A more detailed examination of migration flows from specific cities and reserves is also provided. The census data show that reserve communities were net gainers of migrants between 1991 and 1996, whereas census metropolitan areas (CMA) were net losers. This continues a pattern that has existed from the late 1960s. Registered Indian women were more migratory than their male counterparts, and those who moved tended to be in the young adult age group. In terms of overall mobility, Registered Indians living off-reserve were more mobile than both the Canadian population in general, and Registered Indians living in reserve communities.

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## 1 Introduction

The Aboriginal population in Canadian cities has grown substantially since the 1960s. This growth has occurred in terms of absolute numbers, as a proportion of the total Aboriginal population, and as a proportion of the total urban population. The growth of the urban Aboriginal population has been commonly characterized as resulting from large numbers of people moving from reserves to cities, searching for employment and relief from crushing poverty in their home communities. Two recent newspaper articles provide telling examples of this characterization:

*Manitoba's reserves are pockets of desperate poverty... islands of poverty can emerge when a large number of people reject the option of going where the jobs are even though their home community offers little in way of economic opportunity ... Rural 'Aboriginal' chiefs must accept that there are times when the only way to escape poverty on the reserve is to leave.<sup>1</sup>*

*Some aboriginal communities are lucky enough to sit on oil and gas deposits; many of them, however, have few natural resources. The reserves are clearly inadequate as generators of economic activity. Hence the exodus to urban areas (emphasis added). The reserves are caught in a country-wide shift from rural to urban Canada. People are moving from rural to urban Canada, and from northern areas to southern cities. Apart from natural-resource extraction and seasonal tourism, rural Canada has a dwindling economic base. Cities generate most of the country's income, intellectual capital and future prospects.<sup>2</sup>*

Both of these quotes, while examples of commonly-held beliefs, reflect a serious misunderstanding of the actual patterns of Aboriginal mobility in Canada. As this paper will demonstrate, there has been no mass exodus among Registered Indians to urban areas, and the growth that has occurred in the urban Registered Indian population, in particular, has been much more the result of legislative changes and natural increase than of migration. As well, it does not appear that all migration of

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<sup>1</sup> Escaping Poverty, Winnipeg Free Press, April 8, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Simpson, Globe and Mail, May 19, 1999.

Registered Indians is necessarily undertaken in search of employment, despite the way it is often characterized. Through analysis of the available census data, a more accurate picture of Registered Indian mobility can be seen, and the true patterns of migration can be understood.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Patterns of Registered Indian Mobility and Migration**

The first suggestion that there was a large amount of migration into cities from reserves was made by Hawthorn (1966), who concluded that there were large numbers of people moving from reserves into cities, in search of better employment opportunities. Hawthorn predicted that many reserve communities would eventually cease to exist because they experienced more out-migration than their numbers and replacement could support. However, there was little quantitative evidence of such migration in that largely anthropological study. The first conclusive analysis of quantitative data on the migration of Aboriginal people was undertaken by Siggner (1977), using 1971 Census data. These data showed that the destination for 28% of Registered Indians who had moved between 1966 and 1971 was a Metropolitan Area, while 27% had an on-reserve residence as their destination. The strongest single out-migration flow was from rural, non-reserve areas, with people generally moving into reserves and urban areas. Rather than being a unidirectional flow from reserves to cities, both reserve communities and urban areas were net gainers of migrants between 1961 and 1971.

This pattern of positive net migration to both reserves and cities has continued throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Norris (1990) notes that the movement between reserves and urban areas had intensified since the early 70's. "Due in part to the growing stream of Indians from urban areas, migrants to reserves outnumbered those leaving reserves over the 1976-81 period: 3,200 status Indians left reserves and settlements, while 10,700 moved in, yielding a net inflow of 7,500. Nearly two thirds of this net gain was due to the flow from urban areas." 1991 Census data indicate that both reserves and census metropolitan areas (CMA) were net gainers of migrants between 1986 and 1991 as well, while both rural non-reserve areas and smaller urban areas experienced a net loss of Registered Indian migrants. During this period, reserve communities had net gains of more than that of CMAs (Clatworthy, 1997: 31).

While there may not be evidence to support the idea of a massive amount of migration into cities, there does seem to be evidence that the Aboriginal population is generally more mobile than the Canadian population as a whole. This seems to especially be the case for those who do not live on-reserve, or in other Aboriginal communities or settlements (Norris, 1985; 1990; 1996). Clatworthy (1994) also noted the higher mobility of the Aboriginal identity population off-reserve, with more than 70% of the urban population having moved over a 5-year period. With the much higher mobility of the off-reserve Registered Indian population there is a greater chance of moving more than once. An earlier work by Siggner based on 1971 Census data using the “frequency of moves” question showed that Band Indians migrated more frequently than Canadians as a whole (Siggner, 1977). Earlier studies based on 1981 Census data (Robitaille and Choiniere, 1985; Norris and Pryor, 1984) also showed that in the south, the Inuit and Aboriginal populations in general were more mobile than their counterparts living in northern areas, and at the same time more mobile than non-Aboriginals in the south. Higher mobility rates for Aboriginal people living off-reserve suggest a very transient population, and may reflect a more marginalized position of Aboriginal peoples in mainstream society away from their home communities – an issue which will be further developed later. One aspect of this is a lack of affordable housing stock in the city (Trovato, 1994: 28; Cooke, 1999).

## 2.2 Migration as a Component of Population Growth

The idea that *both* reserves and larger urban areas have been consistent net gainers of migrants may be a surprise to those who have assumed that there has been a continuing exodus of people from reserves. This perception is likely to be at least partly due to the growth that has occurred in the Aboriginal population in urban areas, in particular among Registered Indians. As Clatworthy (1997) notes, there are several major factors in addition to migration that influence the demographic growth of the Registered Indian population: fertility, mortality, family formation, intermarriage, C-31 restorations and registrations<sup>3</sup>, and Indian registration and band

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<sup>3</sup> In 1985, amendments were made to the *Indian Act* (which are commonly referred to as Bill C-31). These amendments contained three sets of provisions that play a central role in shaping Indian demography:

- the reinstatement of Registered Indian status to individuals who had lost status through prior versions of the *Act* and for the first time registration of their children;
- new rules governing entitlement to Indian registration for all children born to a Registered Indian parent after April 17, 1985 (i.e., status inheritance rules); and,
- the opportunity for individual First Nations to establish their own rules and provisions governing membership (i.e., band membership rules).

membership rules<sup>4</sup>. Registered Indian Status is a legal condition, and the size of this population is therefore subject to change as a result of changes in legal definitions. As well, census data rely on individual self-reporting of ethnic identity. There is evidence that, as individual awareness and ethnic self-identity changes, so too can the reporting of these affiliations in responses to the census questionnaire. This phenomenon is known as ethnic mobility and can itself be considered a component of growth in determining population size of the different Aboriginal groups as demonstrated by Guimond (1999).

Any one of these factors could result in differential growth rates between reserves and cities. Indeed, a closer examination of these factors shows that over the past decade the largest part of the increase in the Registered Indian population off-reserve has been due to reinstatements resulting from Bill C-31.

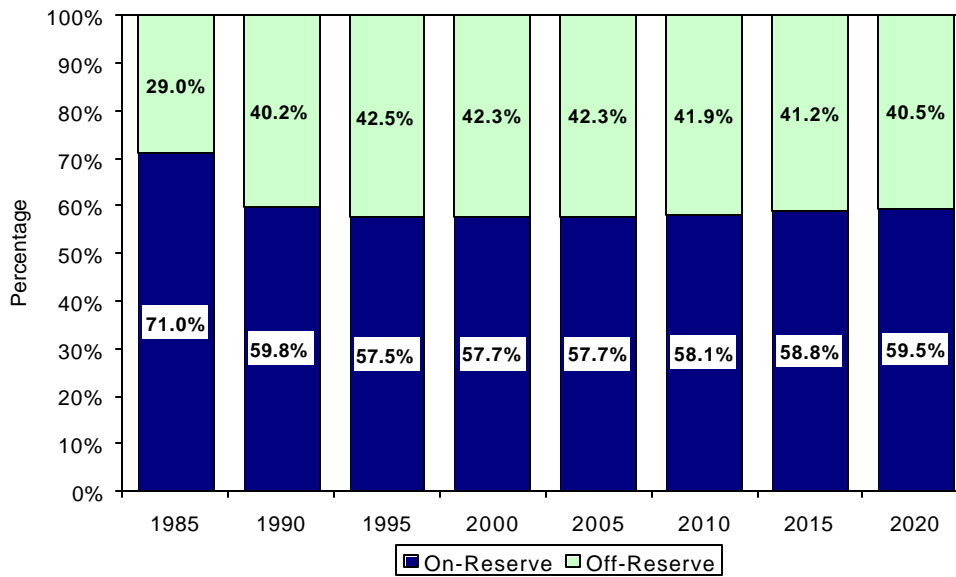
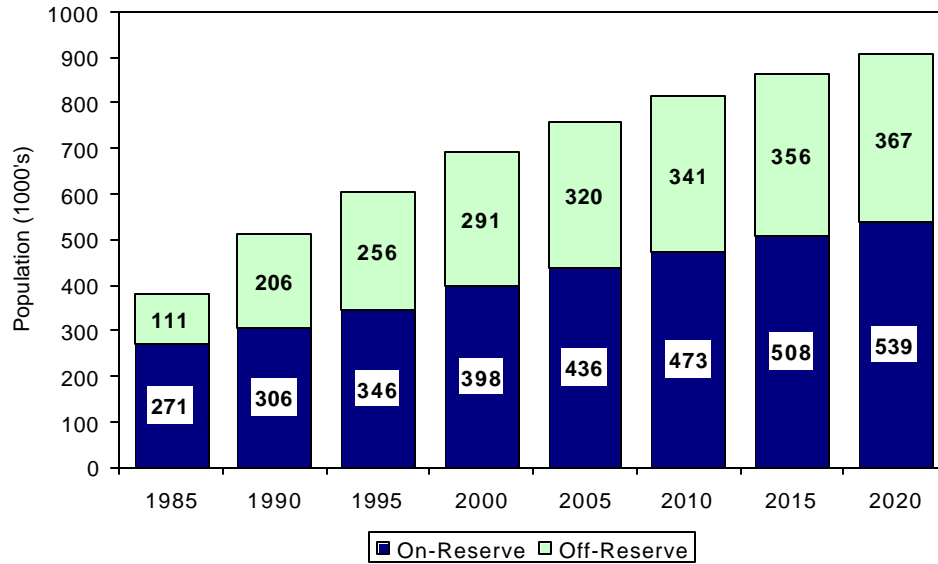
The two graphs in Figure 1 show the 1996-2021 Register-based projections of the Registered Indian population (Loh et. al., unpublished paper). What is interesting in these two graphs is the faster growth of the Registered Indian population that occurred between 1985 and 1995. In 1985, only 29% of the Registered Indian population lived off-reserve. By 1995, this proportion grew to 42.5%. The rapid growth of the off-reserve population during this ten year period has often been attributed to the migration of Registered Indians to cities from reserves. As we have mentioned, however, there has been no evidence for such a mass migration in the 1985-1995 period. In fact, the main factor responsible for the rapid off-reserve population growth has been the number of Bill C-31 reinstatements. Figure 2 shows the annual number of Bill C-31 reinstatements that have occurred on an annual basis since 1985. To date, there have been over 120,000 persons who have been reinstated as Registered Indians. Data from the Indian Register show that as of the end of 1995, only six percent of the Bill C-31 registrants were residing on-reserve (Clatworthy, 1997). The fact that almost ninety-four percent of the Bill C-31 registrants continue to reside off-reserve has meant that from 1985 to 1995 there has been a dramatic shift in the on-/off-reserve population split. Table 1 shows the possible impact that Bill C-31 registrants may have had on the census population counts between 1991 and 1996. While the population of the Registered Indian population living off-reserve grew from 201,090 to 260,755,<sup>5</sup> off-reserve Bill C-31

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<sup>4</sup> The demographic impact of the reinstated population is understated here because children of Registered Indians, who were reinstated under Bill C-31, that were born since 1985 are not counted as reinstated Indians. Current research is being undertaken to determine the exact size of this group of children born since 1985 whose parents were reinstated through Bill C-31.

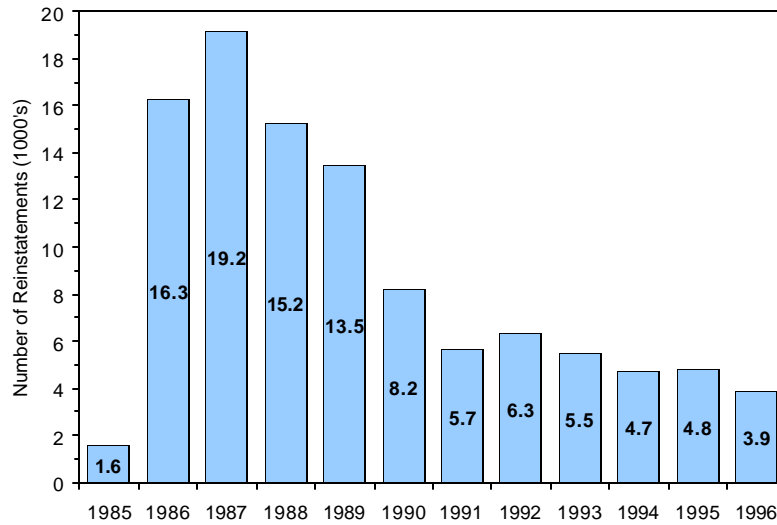
<sup>5</sup> Note that figures between 1991 and 1996 are not directly comparable for a number of reasons, the major one being differentials in incomplete enumeration of reserves.

**Figure 1**  
**Registered Indian Population Projections, Canada, 1985-2020**



Source: Loh et al., unpublished paper.

**Figure 2**  
**Annual Number of Bill C-31 Reinstatements, Canada, 1985-1996**



Source: INAC, Indian Register.

**Table 1**  
**Population Growth Factors, Registered Indians, Canada, 1991-1996**

**Census Count of Registered Indians (Data unadjusted)**

	On-Reserve	Off-Reserve
1991	184,710	201,090
1996	227,285	260,755
Difference	+42,575	+59,665

**Indian Registry**

	On-Reserve	Off-Reserve
Bill C-31 Reinstatements 1991-1996	1,619	25,364

Source: Statistics Canada, special tabulations, 1991 and 1996 Censuses of Canada.  
 INAC, Indian Register.

additions represent an estimated 42% of this growth. It is also worth noting that the census counts of the on-reserve population also increased significantly between 1991 and 1996, further substantiating the fact that reserves are not experiencing a mass exodus of their population.

Loh et al. (unpublished paper) projected no change in the relative proportion of the on- and off-reserve population from 1995 to 2020, (Figure 1) because the number of future reinstatements is slowly diminishing and is counterbalanced by the higher fertility rates on-reserve (Figure 3). Although on-/off-reserve migration assumptions were not incorporated into these earlier DIAND population projections, both current and past trends of on-/off-reserve flows indicate net inflows to reserves.

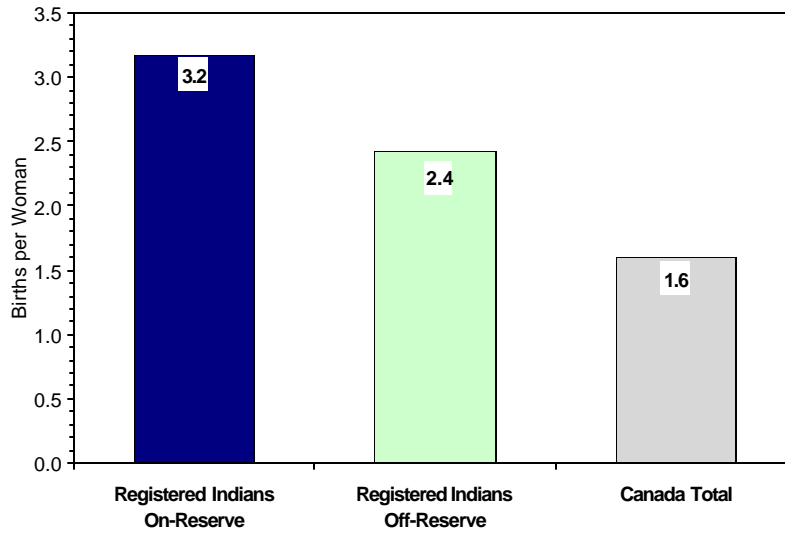
Other projections of the Registered Indian population (1991 Census-based) prepared for the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) incorporated the impacts of both migration and reinstatements as well as natural increase. These projections show that given the continuation of current trends migration would have accounted for about 25% of the projected growth on-reserve in 1996 (Figure 4). Major changes in the distribution of the Aboriginal population on- and off-reserve have been more a result of changing ethnic identities or legal status, than migration or natural increase.

### **2.3 Age and Gender: Characteristics of Migrants**

The characteristics of Registered Indian migrants, in terms of their age and sex, will affect their experiences upon arrival in a new community, the types of community services that they are likely to consume, and will also change the composition of the communities of origin and destination. One common feature of all human migration is that it is undertaken by young adults more than any other age group (Shaw, 1975). This is also true for mobility and migration among Registered Indians (Clatworthy, 1980, 1981, 1995; Peters, 1994; Siggner, 1977).

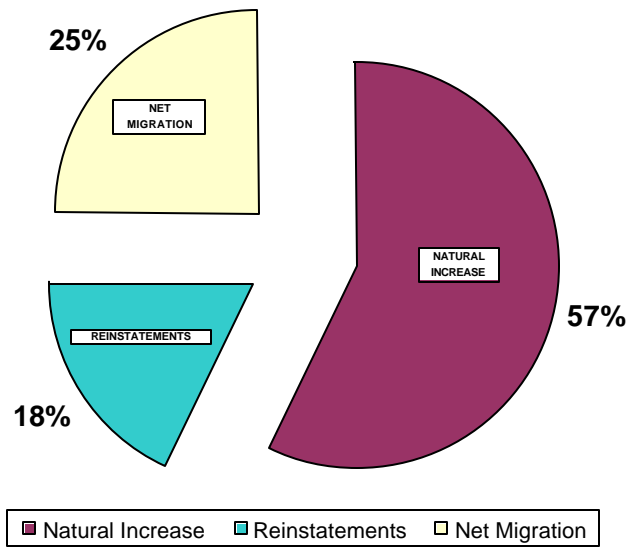
There are distinct patterns of gender in the mobility of Aboriginal people, and this may indicate that Registered Indian men and women may move for somewhat different reasons. Women have been found to predominate among Registered Indian migrants to cities, while there are more men among those who move from cities to reserves (Peters, 1994). Peters suggests that Aboriginal women may tend to move in a family context, whereas men may tend to move as lone, "economically motivated" individuals (Peters, 1994:24). Clatworthy (1980, 1981; Clatworthy and Hull, 1983) provides evidence that women migrants to prairie cities are more likely to cite housing or family reasons, or problems with their home communities, as

**Figure 3**  
**Estimated Fertility Rates, Canada, 1996**



Source: Loh et al., unpublished paper.

**Figure 4**  
**Projected Components of Growth, Registered Indians, On-Reserve, Canada, 1996**



Source: Norris, Kerr and Nault, 1995.



reasons for migration, whereas men tend to report that they had moved for economic reasons. The phenomenon of young Registered Indian women leaving reserves to a greater extent than men is similar to, but much more pronounced than, the higher out-migration of women from rural areas among the Canadian population in general (Norris, 1990). Indeed, young women seem to be more migratory in general, as an analysis of 1996 Census data on interprovincial migrants for all Canadians noted:

*As has been the case for many years, men and women aged 25 to 29 at the time of the census were the most mobile.... From this peak, mobility declined steadily with age. ... Women aged 15 to 24 were more likely to move than men, as has been the case for several censuses. The tendency to greater mobility among young women was most pronounced in the age groups 20 to 24. A high proportion of these women generally have partners who are a few years older than they are, that is, in the 25 to 29 age group, which was the most mobile for men. (Statistics Canada, 1998: 12)*

A number of studies by Gerber (1977), Clatworthy (1980, 1996), and Norris (1985, 1990, 1996) have documented the fact that women are over-represented in the Aboriginal migrant population, along with younger families and woman-headed lone-parent families (Clatworthy, 1994). Aboriginal women, especially on reserves, experience push/pull factors in their moves that are different from or additional to those experienced by non-Aboriginal women. The economies of many reserve communities offer employment opportunities that are more traditionally associated with men, such as jobs in resource extraction and construction. As well, Aboriginal women may be more likely to have higher education than Aboriginal men, and therefore may be better suited to take advantages of employment opportunities in urban areas. In the case of female-headed lone-parent families, there may be little choice but to leave in order to look for employment. There has also been some evidence that social conditions in some reserve communities may be such that women may leave in order to escape situations of abuse (Cooke, 1999).

## **2.4 Reasons for Migration**

Human migration is often described as taking place within a cost-benefit framework, in which migration comes about as the result of a rational decision-making process (Lee, 1966; Trovato, et al. 1994). The decision to move, or not to move, is made after a weighing of the relative benefits available in the community of origin, those available at possible destinations, and the costs that would be incurred by moving.

The decision to move, or to remain, has been cast as the result of competing “pushes”, or reasons to leave one’s current place of residence, and “pulls”, or benefits to be gained by moving somewhere else (Sjaastad, 1962). The decision to move is one in which people seek to “optimize their overall...quality of life” (Trovato, 1994: 3).

While a cost-benefit, or push-pull framework is appealing in terms of its simplicity, the difficulty remains in trying to identify exactly what are the factors that influence people’s decisions to move or to stay. The attributes of any particular community that may contribute to a better “quality” of life may include many social, economic, and political characteristics, and different individuals will clearly value these factors differently, and in light of their own personal situations.

In the case of the migration of Aboriginal people in Canada, there are several specific factors that have been identified as contributing to people’s decision to leave reserve communities. Chief among the factors that have been identified as “pushes” from reserve areas have been the lack of employment opportunities, and resulting difficult social conditions in many communities (Trovato, 1994: 15). A number of studies have focused on poor economic conditions on reserves as the causes for a perceived large-scale migration to cities (Hawthorn, 1966; McCaskill, 1970; Falconer, 1985; Trovato, 1994). However, the common belief that the primary reason for migration from reserves to cities is in search of employment has not been subject to much empirical testing. Denton (1972), in a study of migration between a reserve and a nearby prairie city, has concluded that, while mobility for employment was important, a significant number of young people may move in order to get married, or to escape boredom. Krotz (1980) has also found that young people, in particular, may be attracted by the “bright lights” of the city. Gerber (1984) has found that the quality of housing in reserve communities is an important predictor of migration levels, as is institutional completeness, or the ability of the community to satisfy people’s commercial, economic, or other needs. As well, a lack of health facilities, housing, and educational opportunities on-reserve are often cited as factors that push people to leave reserve communities (Trovato, 1994: 18). In some reserve communities, migration out of the community may also be related to band politics, and access to employment and housing opportunities (Cooke, 1999).

The migration from cities to reserves has generally been explained as return migration, or movement to reserves by people who had once left them (Frideres, 1974; Siggner, 1977, Norris, 1990). This migration has often been characterized as resulting from an inability of people who have moved from reserve communities to find employment, or to otherwise “cope” with conditions in the city (Trovato, 1994: 287). Difficulties in the city may result from employment discrimination and racism, as well as difficulties in adjusting to the urban lifestyle. However, while an inability

to find employment in the city is often cited as the major cause of return migration to reserves, individuals' employment histories and education have not been found to be good predictors of return migration (Cooke, 1999).

Rather than concentrating on the factors that may "push" people out of cities to Aboriginal communities, it may be helpful to consider the "pulls" that may be presented by these communities. Reserves play a distinct role in the migration patterns of Aboriginal people. Unlike other migrants, such as international migrants, reserve communities are a home to which return is possible and relatively easy (Lurie, 1967). While urban areas may have some advantages in terms of availability of services and larger job markets, they also have many disadvantages, compared to many reserves. The pull of family and friends, cultural activities, and services that may not be available in other communities make reserves an important destination for Aboriginal people leaving the city. There is evidence that the support of extended families may be a very important resource for people living in Aboriginal communities, and one that is relatively unavailable in the city. While unavailability of adequate housing may lead people to leave some reserve communities, a lack of affordable housing in many cities, combined with difficult social conditions in the city, may also lead people to return to reserves (Trovato, 1994: 28). As well, life in rural Aboriginal communities is qualitatively different, as one might expect, from life in the city. Many people may prefer the slower pace of life on a reserve to that of the city, and may seek to return when circumstances permit. People may perceive their reserve communities as offering better quality of life, in terms of closer ties to other community members, lower crime rates, and better opportunities to participate in cultural activities. Some reserve communities have been described by residents as better places in which to raise children than are urban centres, as they may have less crime and fewer problems of alcohol and drug abuse. Others have suggested that retirement to reserve communities is a desirable option (Cooke 1999).

One of the major reasons for the paucity of research on the motivations for migration is simply the absence of data. While the census is the major source of information regarding the migration and mobility of Canadians, no specific question is asked as to why people move. As a consequence, the reasons why people move can only be deduced inferentially from census data. The 1991 Aboriginal Peoples Survey (APS), which was a post-censal survey, did however include a section on mobility. Moreover, one of the specific questions asked in this survey was, "why did you move?" (Statistics Canada, 1993).

Figure 5 shows an analysis of the 1991 APS with respect to the reasons why Registered Indians moved (Clatworthy and Cooke, 2001). Three types of moves were examined for Registered Indians:<sup>6</sup>

- Off- to on-reserve: those who moved to a reserve from an off-reserve location;
- On- to off-reserve: those who moved from a reserve to an off-reserve residence, and;
- Off- to off-reserve: those who moved from an off-reserve location to another off-reserve location (e.g., from one city to another city or from a rural community to city or vice versa).

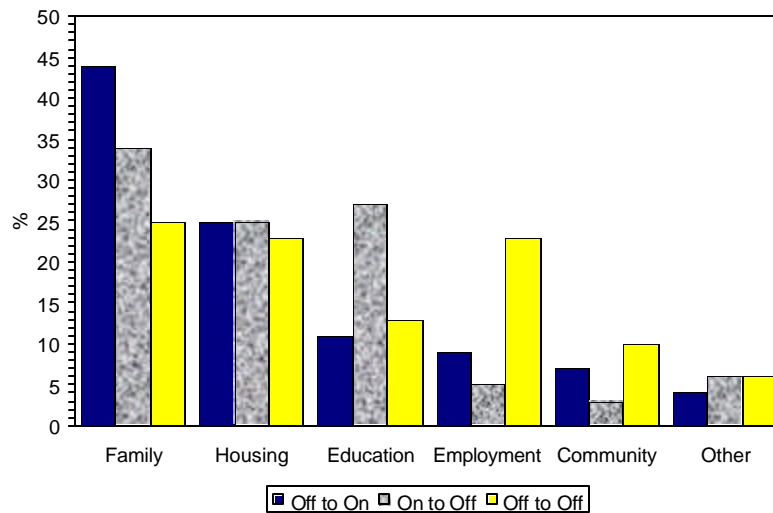
As Figure 5 shows, the major reasons for moving from a reserve (on to off) are due to issues regarding family (34%), education (25%), and housing (27%). Surprisingly, only a small percentage (5%) stated that they were moving off of the reserve for employment reasons. For those Registered Indians moving back to a reserve (off to on) the major reasons were similar to the previous group: family (44%), housing (25%), and to a lesser extent, education (11%). The third group – “off to off” – provided reasons for their moves that were different than the other two groups in that employment played a major role. The major reasons given for moving for the “off to off” group were as follows: family (25%), housing (23%), employment (23%) and education (13%).

For all three groups, family related issues were the number one reason given as to why people moved. Also, nearly a quarter of the moves in all three groups were related to improved housing.

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<sup>6</sup> Technically there is a fourth type of move – on to on -- which consists of moving from one reserve to another. Reasons for these moves were not examined because of the small number of cases in the survey population.

**Figure 5**  
**Reasons for Migration, 1991 Aboriginal Peoples Survey, Canada**



Source: Statistics Canada, 1991 Aboriginal People Survey.

### 3 Methodology

The census is one of the few sources of data on the migration of Canadians, and more specifically that of Registered Indians. The census has been collecting data on mobility and migration since 1961. Since that time, the census has asked the question, “Where was your place of residence 5 years ago?”<sup>7</sup> In 1991, a second question on one-year mobility and migration was added to supplement the latter question. The one-year question asks, “Where was your place of residence 1 year ago?”<sup>8</sup> In 1991, place of residence for the one-year question was restricted to the

<sup>7</sup> Minor changes have been made to the standard “place of residence 5 years ago” question since 1986. These minor revisions were not seen as significantly compromising historical comparability. For a detailed discussion see Norris (1992).

<sup>8</sup> The one-year ago question was added in 1991 because it can provide a direct measure of migration for a one-year period. As such, it yields a “benchmark” for the annual number of both internal migrants and international immigrants. The five-year question is not as reliable for calculating one-year flows because it does not capture multiple moves within a five year time period. Moreover, substantial variation in migration patterns can occur over a five-year period which may over- or under estimate the impact of the one year migration patterns.

provincial level; in 1996 it was extended to the census subdivision (CSD)<sup>9</sup>, thereby permitting the analysis of migration patterns at the CSD, and hence reserve level. The data from both of these questions are analysed in this paper.

### 3.1 Mobility Status Concepts

Mobility status refers to the relationship between a person's usual place of residence on Census Day and his or her usual place of residence either five years or one year earlier, depending on the census question. A person is classified as a non-mover if no difference exists; or in other words, if they are living at the same address. A person is classed as a mover if they are living at a different address. A further distinction is also made between non-migrant and migrant movers. Non-migrant movers are those who, on Census Day, were living at a different address but in the same census subdivision, and therefore in the same community. Migrant movers are those who were residing in a different CSD either five years or one year earlier.<sup>10</sup>

### 3.2 Census Data Limitations

While the census does give us the most complete picture of the patterns and trends of migration in Canada, there are several cautionary notes that one should consider with respect to the use of census data to measure the migration and mobility patterns of Registered Indians.

First, there are a number of inherent limitations associated with mobility and migration data. Demographic, marital status, and socio-economic characteristics can change over time, and are not necessarily the characteristics at the time of migration. For example, since age is measured at the end of the five-year migration interval, the age patterns do not necessarily reflect the ages at which people actually moved. With the one-year migration interval data a more accurate picture of the actual characteristics at the time of migration can be obtained. An additional limitation with interval-based mobility and migration data is that not all moves can be counted. We are only able to observe where an individual was living at the beginning and the end of the interval. Excluded are moves of people who left and returned during the interval, those who made several moves, as well as those of

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<sup>9</sup> The term "census subdivision" (CSD) in general applies to municipalities or their equivalents, such as Indian Reserves, Indian Settlements, or unorganized territories.

<sup>10</sup> One can also make another distinction between internal and external migrants. Internal migrants are those persons who were residing in a different CSD (either five or one years ago) but remained in Canada. and external migrants are those persons who were living outside Canada (either five or one years earlier). The census cannot measure external out migration because Canadians who are residing outside of Canada on Census Day do not participate in the census. Hence, the analysis in this paper is confined to internal migrants.

people who died during the interval. Therefore, in terms of annual migration, the 5-year question is not a completely accurate reflection of either the volume or pattern of migration, and annual variations in patterns cannot be detected. While the one-year data provide a more accurate picture of migration patterns and characteristics for a given year, the limitation is that it could be an unusual or volatile time period and may not be typical of the longer trends. In this sense, the five-year question provides a more accurate portrayal of mobility trends.

Another limitation of the census mobility data concerns the way in which the data are collected. The census uses the long form (the "2B") to ask people about their ethnicity and their mobility, as well as other questions, and this form is administered to a sample of the total census population. It is not used to enumerate those persons outside Canada, or in institutions such as prisons, chronic care facilities, or rooming homes. This "missed" population could be problematic in that the incarceration rates for Aboriginal people are extremely high, particularly in the western provinces. Also, because of the lower rent costs, there are very high concentrations of Aboriginal people living in rooming houses in urban centres.

Third, a significant proportion of the reserve population is not captured in the census due to the incomplete enumeration of certain reserves, as well as high rates of undercoverage on-reserve. Since 1986, many First Nation communities have refused to participate in the census for a variety of reasons, such as an expression of their sovereignty, or distrust of government. Incompletely enumerated reserves often make trends over different census years more difficult to interpret because it is not always the same reserves that are participating from census to census, and also because of the impacts of differential undercoverage between censuses, both on and off reserves. Caution is also required in the comparison of migration data over time, because the population of Registered Indians is not directly comparable over census periods in terms of concepts and measurement. To some extent, reserves may be understated as a destination due to the fact that incompletely enumerated reserves are not represented in the current destination data, although they are in the origin as place of residence five years ago. For purposes of analyzing the census data on migration flows incompletely enumerated reserves were excluded as origins in their respective censuses.

Fourth, it should be noted that some of the gender differentials in census-based out-migration data could also be attributed in part to gender differentials in undercoverage and self-reporting of mobility. There is higher undercoverage for adult males because of the population missed in institutions, and there may be gender differences in self-reporting on Aboriginal/Registered Indian census questions.

Finally, geographic units sometimes change over time. For example, new reserves may be created from census year to census year. Similarly, the geographic designation of a city or other geographic units can change. For example, cities sometimes merge with other cities or rural areas and this can result in the creation of new census metropolitan areas (those cities with a population over 100,000). Thus, some caution must again be used in making comparisons among geographic areas such as census metropolitan areas over time.

## **4 Migration Patterns: 1991 to 1996**

### **4.1 5-Year Net Migration Flows**

An examination of the net migration between 1991 and 1996 describes the direction in which a majority of migrants moved, and whether cities, reserves, or rural areas tended to gain or to lose migrants from other areas. Of course, a positive net in-migration does not mean that people did not leave that area during the period, only that in-migrants outnumbered out-migrants. Movement in the reverse direction may still be important, but net migration gives us some indication of the effect that migration has on the populations of the various areas.

As indicated, an important aspect of the migration patterns of Registered Indians that distinguishes them from other Aboriginal groups is their movement to and from reserves, especially between reserves and cities. Between 1991 and 1996, 61% of out-migrants from reserves moved to urban areas (CMA and non-CMA), while 69% of in-migrants to reserves came from urban areas. This continues the pattern that has been seen for the past five census periods; that both reserves and cities have been the major destinations. Regardless of origin (from reserves or other communities) large cities or urban CMA areas were the major destination for 29% of Registered Indian migrants in 1996, followed by 28% each for reserves and smaller cities, with the remaining 15% of migrants moving to non-reserve rural areas.

While there is some attraction to urban areas, the stream of migration from reserves to cities is smaller compared to the flow from cities to reserves. Overall, seven out of ten Registered Indian migrants over the 1991-96 period can be classified into three major flows: urban-to-urban (37%), urban-to-reserve (20%) and rural-to-urban (13%). These proportions are similar to those for the 1986-91 period. Flows from reserves



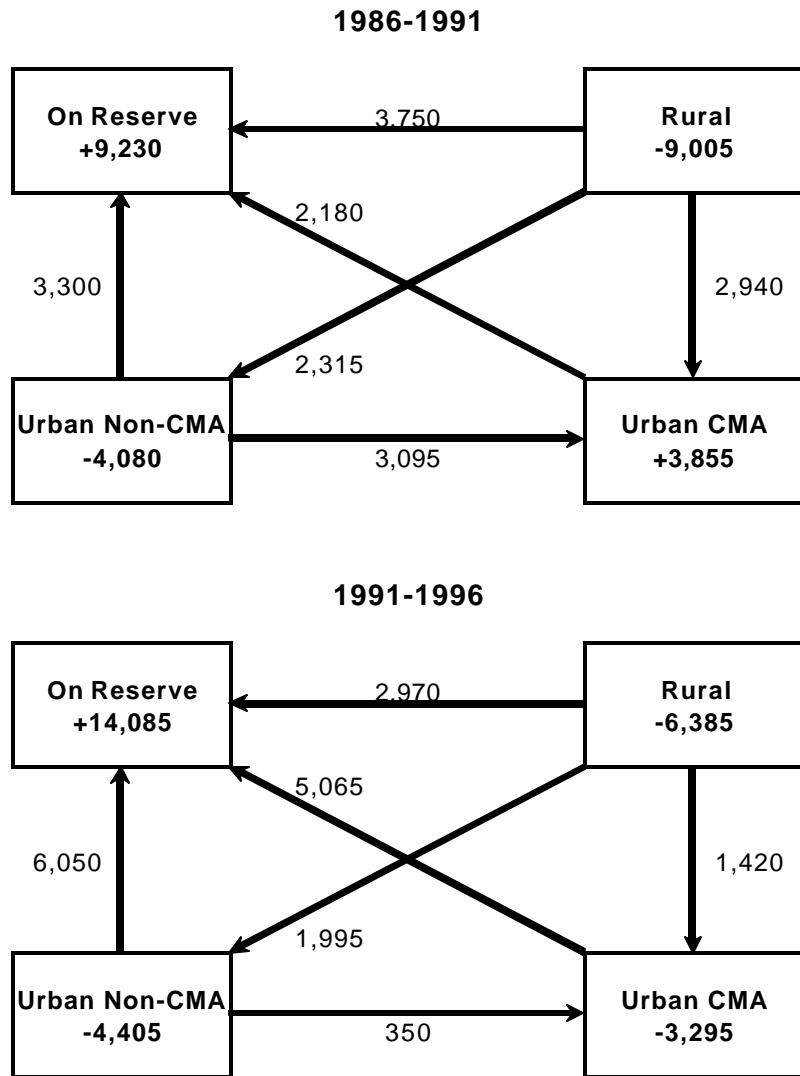
to urban areas (CMA and non-CMA) accounted for only 7% of the migration volume. Between 1991 and 1996, for every 1,000 Registered Indians on-reserve, only 38 had migrated out over the five-year period<sup>11</sup> compared to much higher out-migration rates of Registered Indians from small cities (non-CMA; 258 per 1,000), rural communities (288 per 1,000) and large urban areas (CMA; 192 per 1,000).

The pattern of net migration between reserves, rural, and urban areas between 1991 and 1996 was largely similar to that observed in previous census periods. As we have indicated, census data suggest that there has been a consistent net inflow or gain of migrants to reserves, although relatively small in relation to the reserve population. According to 1991 Census data, the 1986-91 period saw a net inflow of 9,200 migrants to reserves as well as a net inflow of about 3,900 migrants to urban CMAs. These latter inflows were at the expense of urban non-CMAs that lost just over 4,000 Registered Indians from urban non-CMAs, and a significantly large net outflow of 9,000 migrants from rural areas (Figure 6).

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<sup>11</sup> Not adjusted for incompletely enumerated reserves.

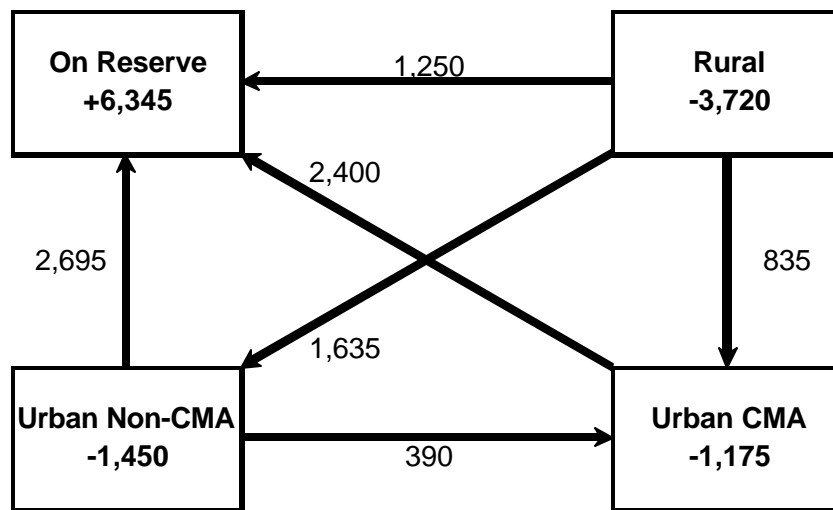
**Figure 6**  
**Five-Year Net Migration Flows, Registered Indians Aged 5+**  
**Canada, 1986-1991 and 1991-1996**



Source: Statistics Canada, special tabulations, 1991 and 1996 Censuses of Canada.

The overall effect of Registered Indian migration patterns for the 1991–96 period is a net inflow to reserves of about 14,100 migrants and corresponding net outflows or losses of some 6,400 migrants from rural areas, 3,300 from large cities (urban CMAs), and 4,400 from the smaller cities (urban non-CMAs). Migration data for the one year period 1995-96 reflects the same pattern of loss and gain, with reserves gaining 6,300 migrants, with corresponding losses for rural areas (3,700), urban CMAs (-1,200) and urban non-CMAs (-1,500) (Figure 7).

**Figure 7**  
**One-Year Net Migration Flows, Registered Indians Aged 1+, Canada, 1995-1996**



Source: Statistics Canada, special tabulations, 1996 Census of Canada.

Although the major migration flows continue to be between cities and reserves, the impact in relative terms of net gain or loss of population has been most significant for rural communities, and usually least significant for reserves. Rural areas lose Registered Indian population largely through migration to urban areas. While small cities have consistently posted small net losses of migrants over the past couple of decades, over the 1991-96 period both small and large cities experienced net losses.

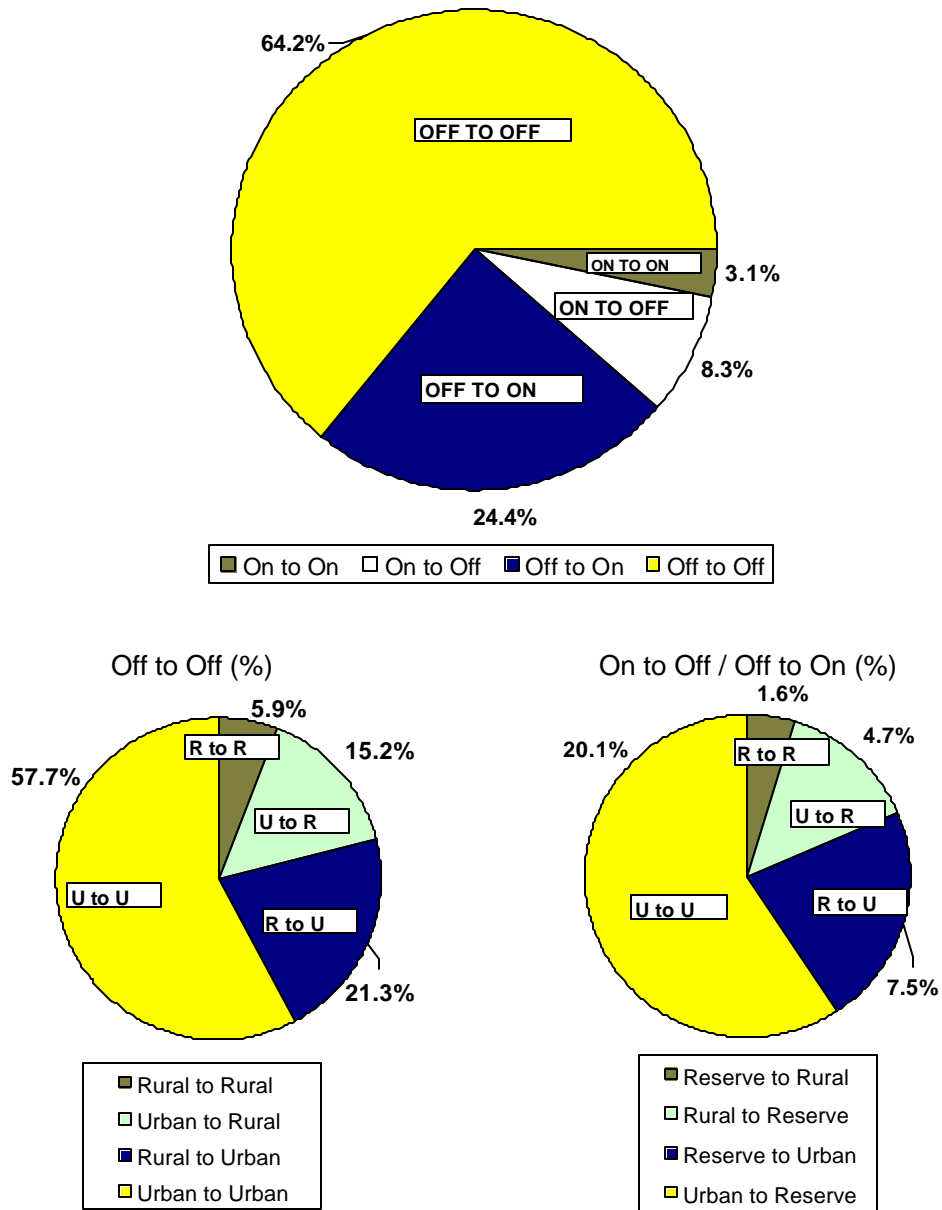
Net migration rates by place of residence over the 1991–96 period indicate the extent of the impact of migration on population, by comparing the number of people who moved in a particular direction, to the population size. The impact was most negative for the rural population, with a net outflow of 114 migrants per 1,000 rural residents and least negative for large urban metropolitan areas with a net loss of only 34 migrants per 1,000 Registered Indians in urban CMAs. For reserves, the only geography experiencing a net inflow of migrants between 1991 and 1996, the impact was less than rural areas, with a net gain of about 73 migrants per 1,000 residents on-reserve.

From the above analysis of flows it would seem that while the major focal points in Registered Indian migration continue to be urban areas and reserves, the impact in terms of net gain or loss of population is felt most significantly for rural areas, followed by reserves, and is least significant for urban areas as a whole. Clearly, rural areas lost Registered Indian population through migration mainly to urban areas. On the other hand, large inflows to urban areas are totally negated by larger out-flows of urban population to reserves.

Migration is a reciprocal process. The 1991-96 migration patterns show the continued flow of migrants from cities to reserves, partly because of the large pool of potential migrants that the urban Aboriginal population represents. As we have noted, reserves may represent the stability and support of extended family, kinship networks, cultural and other benefits that are not available in the city, and it is to be expected that reserves will be a primary destination of out-migrants from urban areas.

In relation to the total volume of migration, migration between on- and off-reserve locations accounted for about a third of some 87,400 Registered Indians who had migrated over the 1991-96 period, while 64% of migrants moved between off-reserve locations, and 3% moved between reserves. Nearly two-thirds of the migration between on- and off-reserve locations involved migration from urban areas to reserves, and well over half of the migration between off-reserve areas was between urban areas (Figure 8).

**Figure 8**  
**Origin-Destination Flows, Registered Indians 5+, Canada, 1991-1996**



Source: Statistics Canada, special tabulations, 1996 Census of Canada.

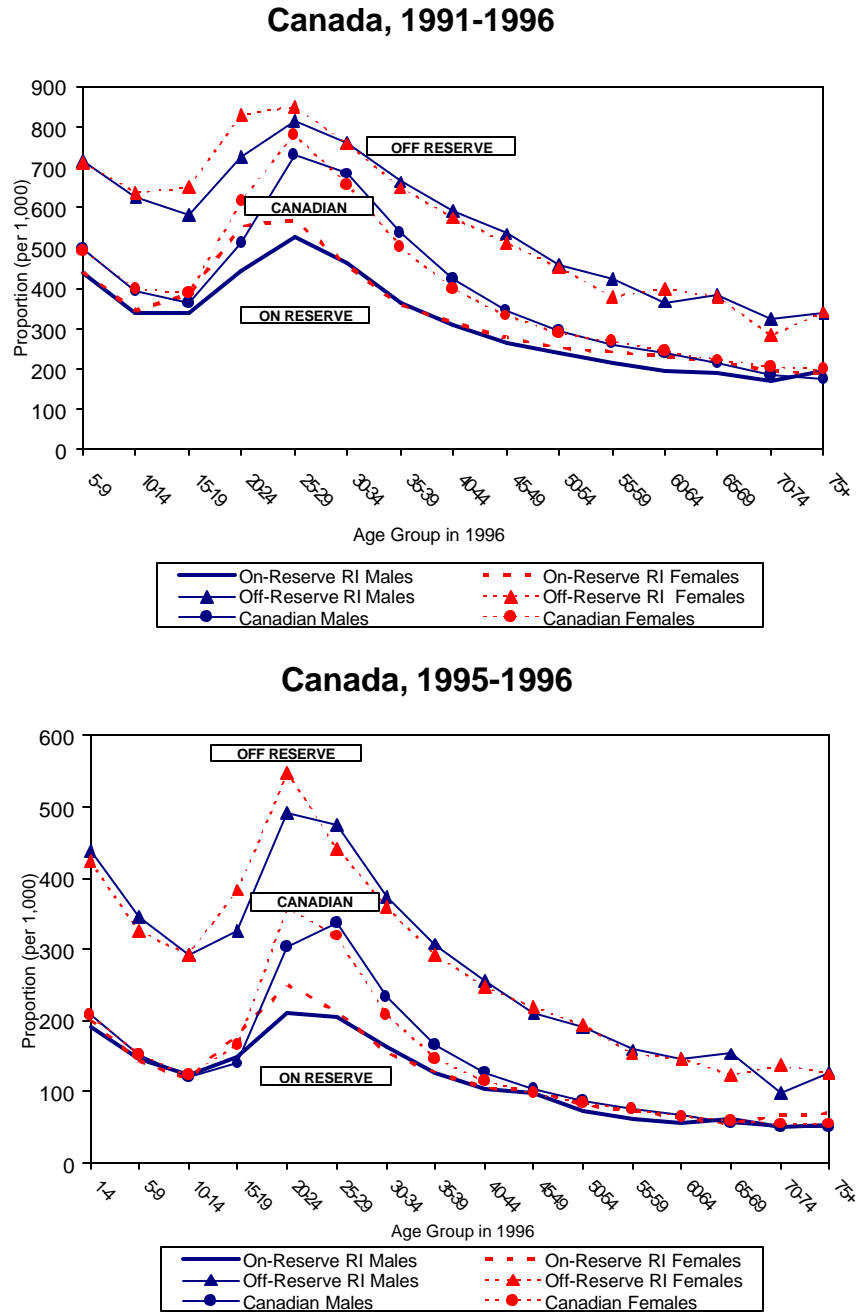
## **4.2 Characteristics of Migrants: Age-Sex Specific Mobility/Migration Rates**

An analysis of mobility and migration rates by age and sex yields a better understanding of the process and role of migration in the life cycle of individuals. Mobility is associated with education, transitions into the labour force (employment, job loss, retirement), household and family formation and dissolution (marriage, divorce, widowhood). These events and life-cycle stages tend to happen at certain ages, and may have different implications for men than for women. Mobility rates follow the standard age pattern for both Aboriginals and all Canadians, low over the school-age years, peaking during the young adult years of 20–29, and then declining fairly steadily thereafter. Young women, particularly those in the 20–24 age group, have been found to move and migrate to a greater extent than do their male counterparts (Norris, 1985; 1990, 1996), and this pattern seems to be continued in the 1996 Census data. For example, between 1991 and 1996, among the Registered Indian population aged 20–24, 829 per 1,000 Registered Indian women living off-reserve had moved, compared with 723 for males (10). Similarly, for Canadians, the female rate was higher than that for males (617 versus 511). Some of this gender difference among youth and young adults is attributable to younger ages at marriage and earlier entry into the labour force of females, factors that are associated with geographical movement.

## **4.3 Mobility and Migration Rates On- and Off-Reserve**

While the general pattern of mobility of younger people prevails in each of the flows between urban, rural, and reserve areas, there are significant differences in the propensity to move or to migrate associated with living on- and off-reserve. These differences can be examined by comparing the rates of mobility and migration for each of these populations. In general, Aboriginal people who live outside their Native communities and settlements have been found to move to a greater extent than those within their own communities, and they tend to be more transient than the general population. Census data have shown that Registered Indians living off-reserve tend to move more frequently than either the on-reserve or the general Canadian populations (Norris, 1985; 1990, 1996). Higher off-reserve mobility rates suggest a very transient population, perhaps reflecting a process of coping with life outside Aboriginal communities. This phenomenon continues to be evident in the 1991 to 1996 data, particularly among young people. For example, between 1991 and 1996, for every 1,000 Registered Indian women aged 20–24 living off-reserve, about 829 had moved at some point over the five-year period, compared with about 554 per 1,000 among those living on-reserve, and 617 for Canadians in general (Figure 9). Overall, mobility and migration rates of Registered Indians off-reserve (655 and 286 per 1,000 respectively) are much greater than the corresponding on-

**Figure 9**  
**Proportion of All Movers by Age and Sex, Canada, 1991-1996 and 1995-1996**



Source: Statistics Canada, special tabulations, 1996 Census of Canada.

reserve rates (381 and 123) and higher than rates for the Canadian population in general (430 and 202). The higher mobility and migration rates of the off-reserve Aboriginal population is only partly attributable to movement from reserves and settlements since they also reflect movement within the same community as well as to and from different communities.

The contrast in mobility between Registered Indian population off – reserve and total Canadian population mobility is more pronounced among residential (non-migrant) movers than migrants (Figure 10). Conversely, the contrast between the on-reserve population and the total Canadian population is greatest among migrants (Figure 11). These comparisons demonstrate that while Registered Indians off-reserve tend to migrate – that is, they change communities more than the average Canadian -- they change dwellings within a community or city to an even greater extent than Canadians in general. On the other hand, the residential mobility of Registered Indians on-reserve is more similar to that of most Canadians. This is to say that in reserve communities people change residences at about the same rate as most Canadians move within the same community.

#### **4.4 Age-Specific Mobility and Migration Rates by Origin and Destination**

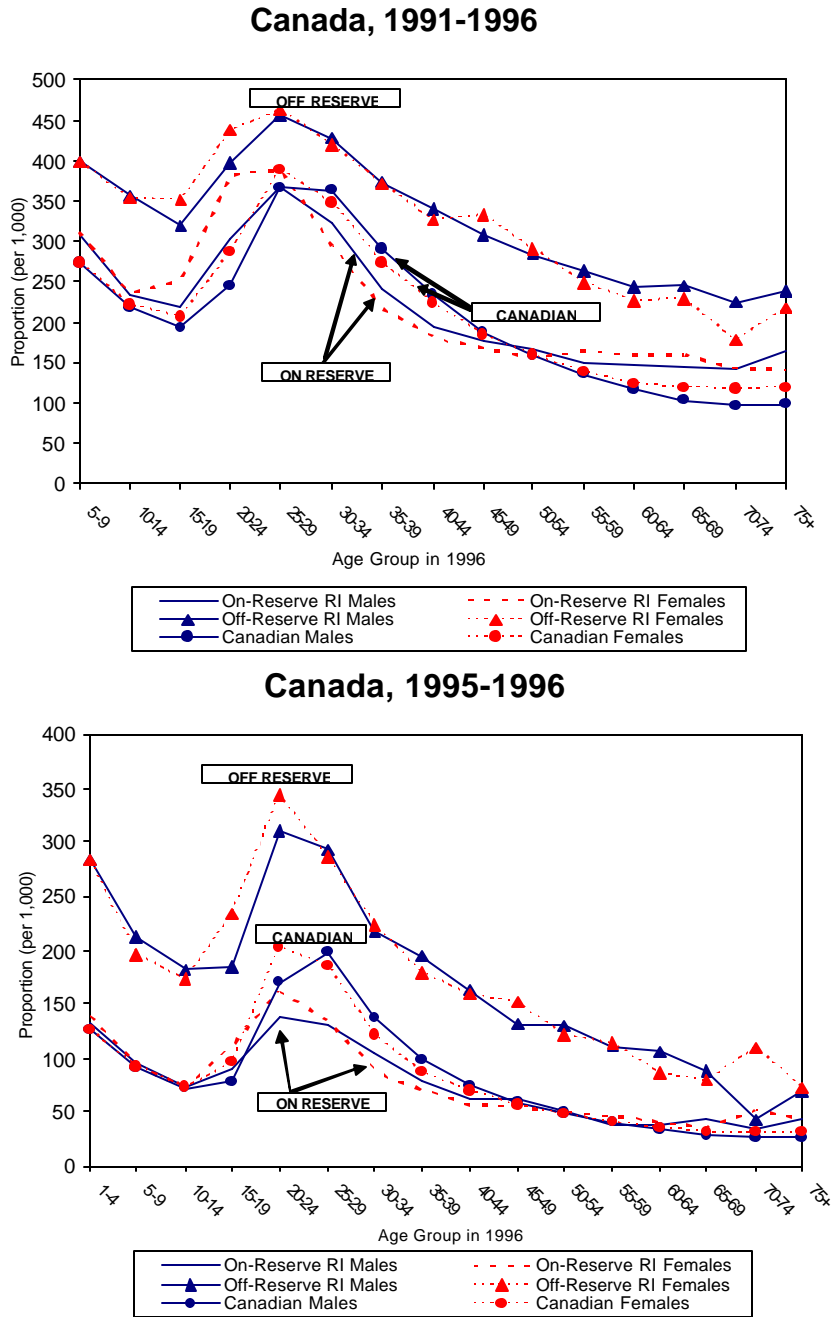
While the analysis of the net flows between reserves, urban, and rural areas may give us some idea of the impact that migration has on the size of each of these areas, an examination of the age-specific rates of migration between areas gives a better picture of the characteristics of those who choose to move. Differences in the age and sex composition of migration streams illustrates possible effects that migration may have on the demographic composition of the communities of origin and destination, and also may shed some light on the possible reasons for migration between areas.

##### **4.4.1 Movement from Reserves**

As we have said, one aspect of migration that has been characterized by a strong gender differential is the movement to and from reserves. Census data have consistently shown that women predominate in out-migration from reserves (Figure 12). This is again true for the 1991-96 period. Among youth aged 20-24, 1996 five-year rates of migration from reserve communities are significantly higher for females (69 per 1,000) than for males (44 per 1,000). Overall, five-year census out-migration rates for males and females are 33 and 43 migrants per 1,000 population on-



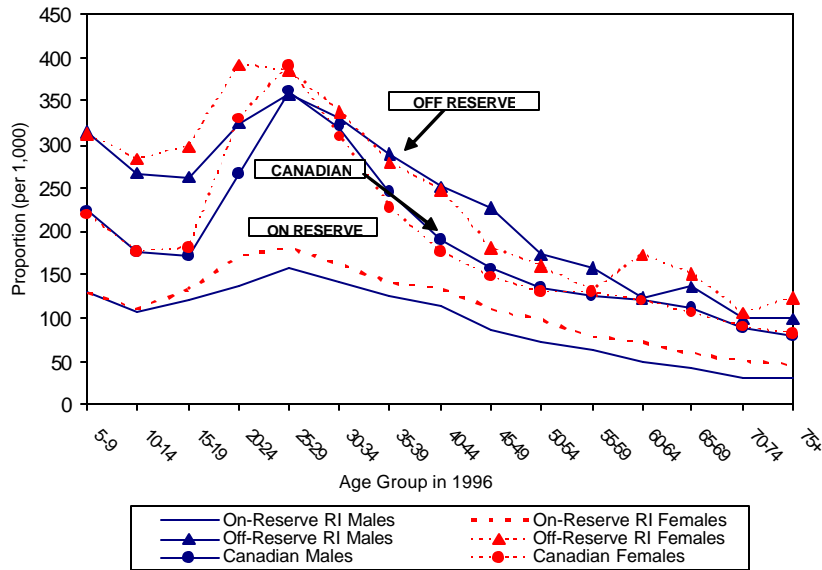
**Figure 10**  
**Proportion of Non-Migrant Residential Movers by Age and Sex, Canada, 1991-1996 and 1995-1996**



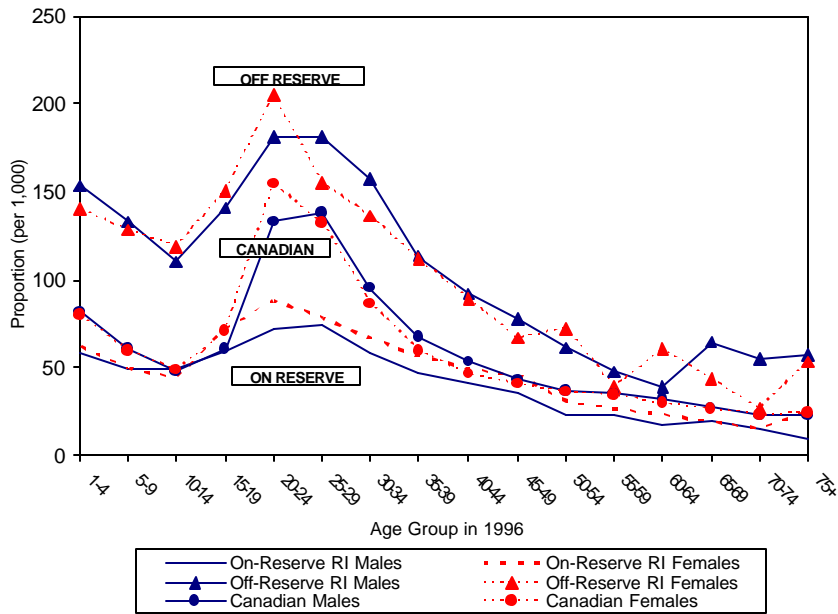
Source: Statistics Canada, special tabulations, 1996 Census of Canada.

**Figure 11**  
**Proportion of Migrant Movers by Age and Sex, Canada, 1991-1996 and 1995-1996**

**Canada, 1991-1996**



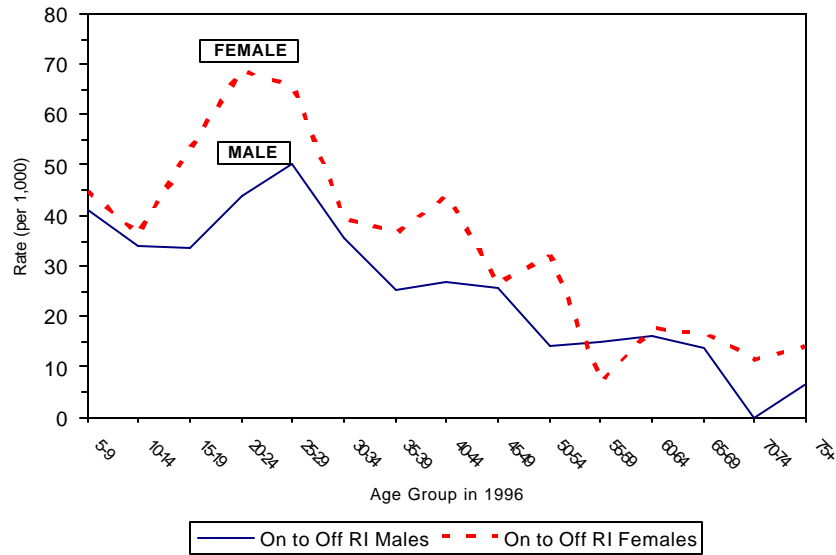
**Canada, 1995-1996**



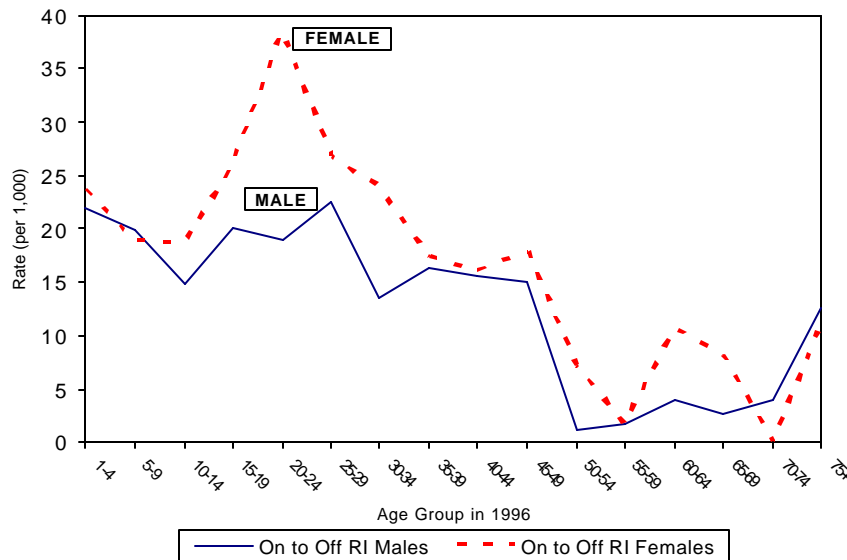
Source: Statistics Canada, special tabulations, 1996 Census of Canada.

**Figure 12**  
**On- to Off- Reserve Migration Rates by Age and Sex, Canada, 1991-1996**  
**and 1995-1996**

**Canada, 1991-1996**



**Canada, 1995-1996**



Source: Statistics Canada, special tabulations, 1996 Census of Canada.

reserve, respectively, for the 1991-96 period.<sup>12</sup> Similar comparisons can be made with the one – year data, and although the rates are lower, the patterns are similar. Overall, one-year out-migration rates for males and females are 16 and 21 migrants per 1,000 population on-reserve, respectively, for the 1995-96 period.

#### 4.4.2 Movement to Reserves

For both one-year and five-year migration data the age-sex specific rates for migration from off-reserve locations to reserves contrast sharply with migration from reserves, particularly with respect to gender differentials (Figure 13). While women, particularly between the youth (15-19) and young adult (30-34) age groups, have a significantly greater propensity to migrate from reserves than men, men migrate to reserves (the opposite direction) at a greater rate than women, especially from age 25-29 on. These gender differentials in the propensity to migrate to and from reserves suggest that men and women experience different push/pull factors in their decisions to migrate. A more detailed analysis of reasons for migration by origin-destination by age and sex is required to better understand the differences between men and women in their migration to and from reserves. From what is known about the reasons for migration, family-related and housing issues are major reasons for moving to reserves, whereas education, in addition to family-related and housing issues, appears to be a major reason for moving from reserves.

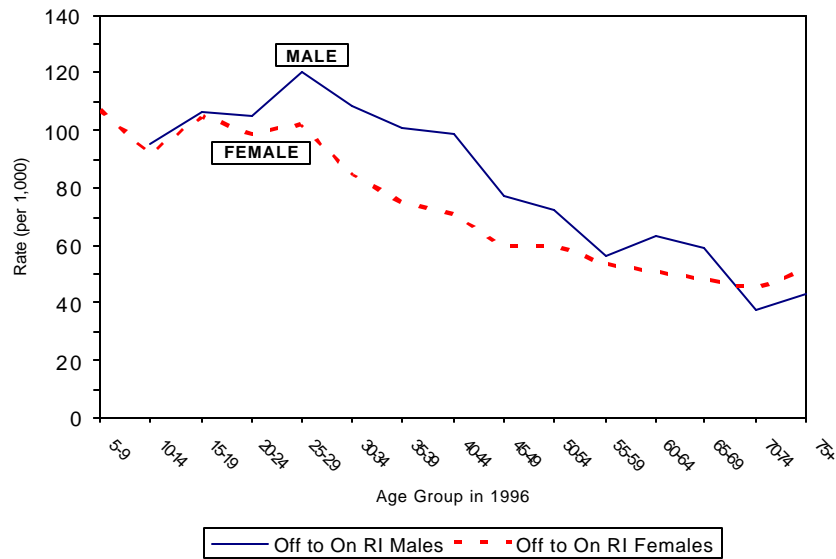
The rate of migration for both males and females from locations off-reserve to reserves is higher than their out-migration from reserves, according to both the one-year and five-year data. For example, for males between 1991 and 1996, the rate of migration from off- to on-reserve was three times the out-migration from reserves (100 out-migrants per 1,000 off-reserve population, compared to 33 per 1,000 on-reserve). The contrast in rates between the two directions is less pronounced for females (83 out-migrants per 1,000 off-reserve population compared to 43 per 1,000 on-reserve).

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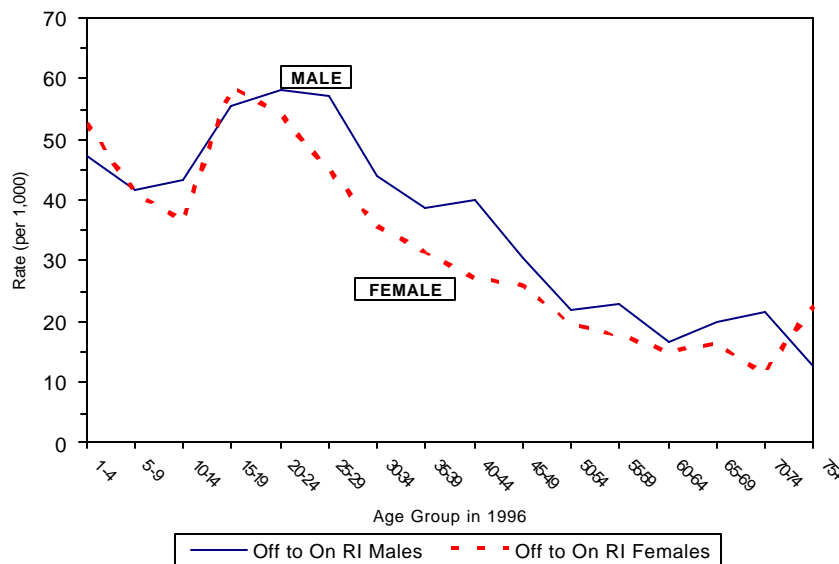
<sup>12</sup> Figures exclude incompletely enumerated reserves and settlements as origins.

**Figure 13**  
**Off- to On- Reserve Migration Rates by Age and Sex, Canada, 1991-1996**  
**and 1995-1996**

**Canada 1991-1996**



**Canada, 1995-1996**



Source: Statistics Canada, special tabulations, 1996 Census of Canada.

### **4.4.3 Movement between Off-Reserve Communities**

Compared with the movement to and from reserves, males and females differ less in their migration between communities off-reserve for both the one-year and five-year data (Figure 14). The data show that among youth (15-24) women have slightly higher rates of migration than men for one-year and five-year migration, a pattern that is generally consistent with most migration streams. Both males and females have significantly higher rates of migration between off-reserve locations, compared to their rate of movement to or from reserves. Overall, for every 1,000 Registered Indian males living off-reserve, 236 had migrated between off-reserve locations over the 1991-96 period, compared to a rate of 100 per 1,000 moving from off-reserve to on-reserve and an out-migration rate of 33 per 1,000 moving from reserves. Unlike the movement to and from reserves employment is a major reason for relocation of Registered Indians among off-reserve communities, along with family related and housing issues.

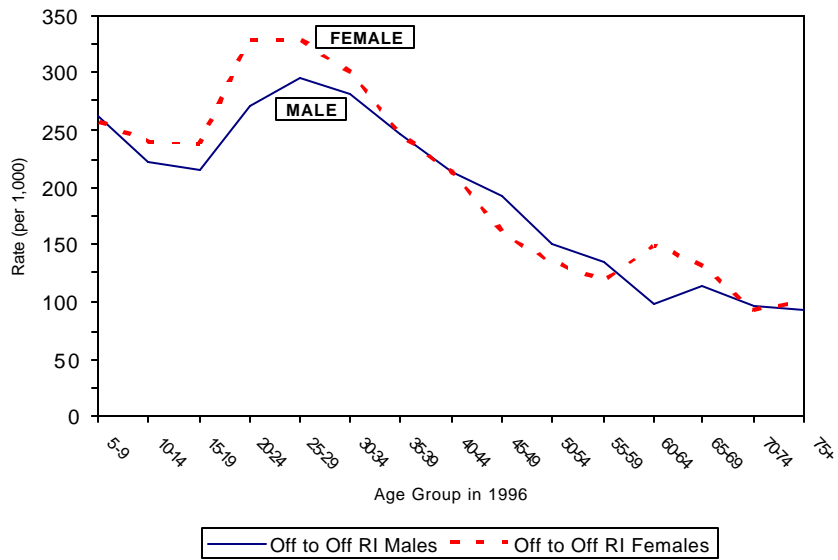
### **4.5 Community Migration Patterns**

As can be seen in Figure 15, between 1991 and 1996 First Nation-reserves or communities experienced higher rates of in-migration than out-migration, such that there was a net inflow to reserves. In contrast, Inuit and Métis communities experienced little difference between the rates of in- and out-migration of other (non-registered) Aboriginal populations, with the result that there was practically no population gain or loss due to migration. As noted earlier, the persistent pattern of net inflows, although small, to reserves since the 1960s suggests the role of benefits as a pull factor, consistent with the observation of housing being a major reason for moving to reserves.

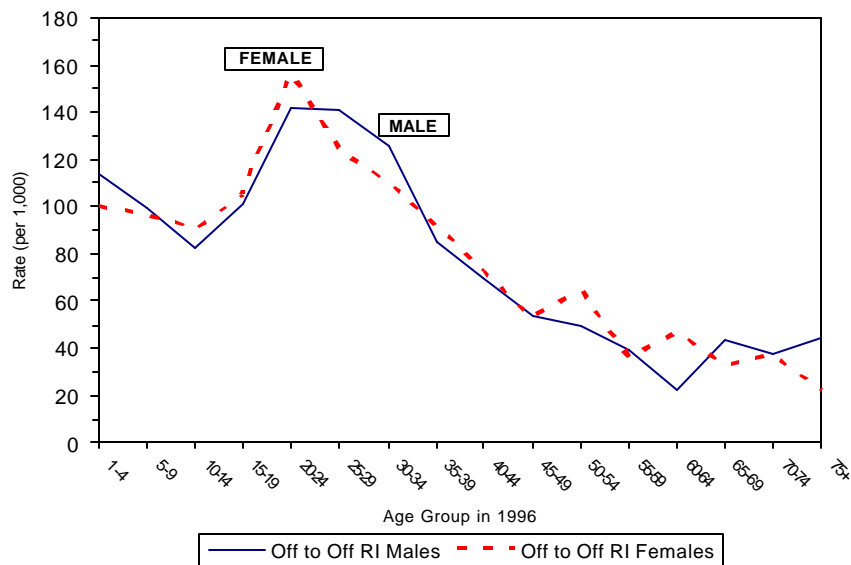
Furthermore, the contrast in migration patterns with other Aboriginal communities that do not have the same benefits would also suggest the role of benefits on-reserve. Migration rates for the larger First Nation reserves show that practically all of the top 10 experience net inflows (Figure 16).

**Figure 14**  
**Migration Rates between Off-Reserve Locations by Age and Sex,**  
**Canada, 1991-1996 and 1995-1996**

**Canada, 1991-1996**

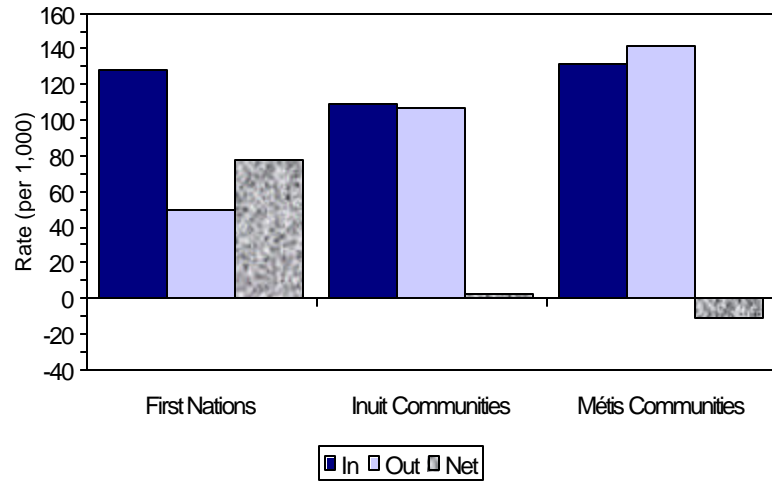


**Canada, 1995-1996**



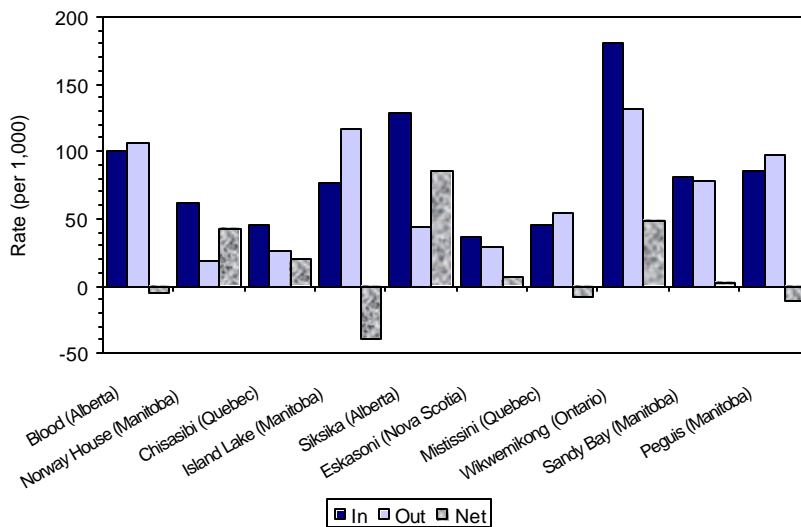
Source: Statistics Canada, special tabulations, 1996 Census of Canada.

**Figure 15**  
**Migration Rates for First Nation, Métis and Inuit Communities, Canada, 1991-1996**



Source: Statistics Canada, special tabulations, 1996 Census of Canada.

**Figure 16**  
**Migration Rates for Most Populated First Nation Communities, Canada, 1991-1996**



Source: Statistics Canada, special tabulations, 1996 Census of Canada.



#### **4.5.1 Differences in Volume and Frequency of Migration and Residential Moves by Place of Residence**

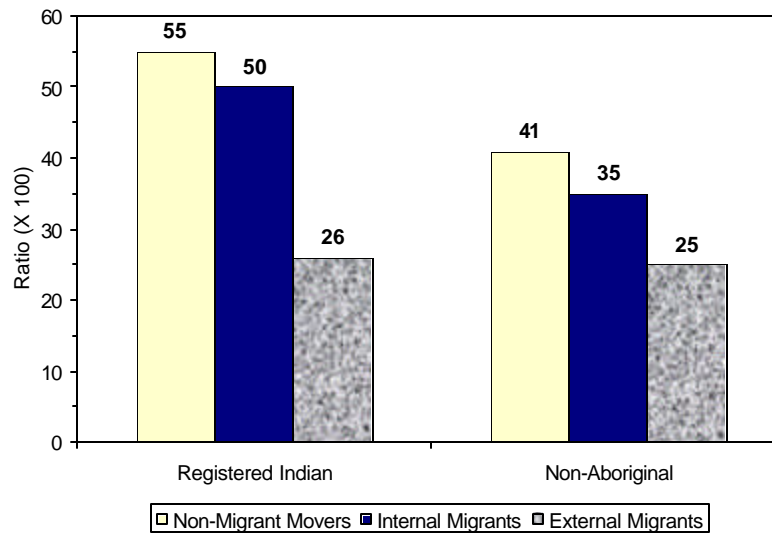
As noted earlier, Registered Indians off-reserve are much more transitory than either the general Canadian population or the on-reserve population. Aboriginal people tend to be more mobile outside of their home communities.

A comparison between 1-year and 5-year volumes of residential movers and migrants between Registered Indians and Canadians in general also suggest that Registered Indians are more mobile in terms of frequency and multiple moves. The 1996 based ratios of one-year to five-year volumes of residential (non-migrant) movers and internal migrants are higher for Registered Indians than for all Canadians (Figure 17). For Registered Indians, the volume of residential movers represents just over 50% of the corresponding five-year volume<sup>13</sup>. The corresponding ratio for the Canadian population is only 40%. Similarly, the Registered Indian ratio for one-year to five-year internal migration is also higher with ratios of about 50% versus 35% respectively. Interestingly, there is little difference between Registered Indians and Canadian ratios for external migrants, indicating that the difference in volumes and frequency of mobility and migration is associated with internal factors.

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<sup>13</sup> Not adjusted for the one-to-four year-old population.

**Figure 17**  
**Ratio of One-Year to Five-Year Volumes of Movers and Migrants,**  
**Canada, 1996**

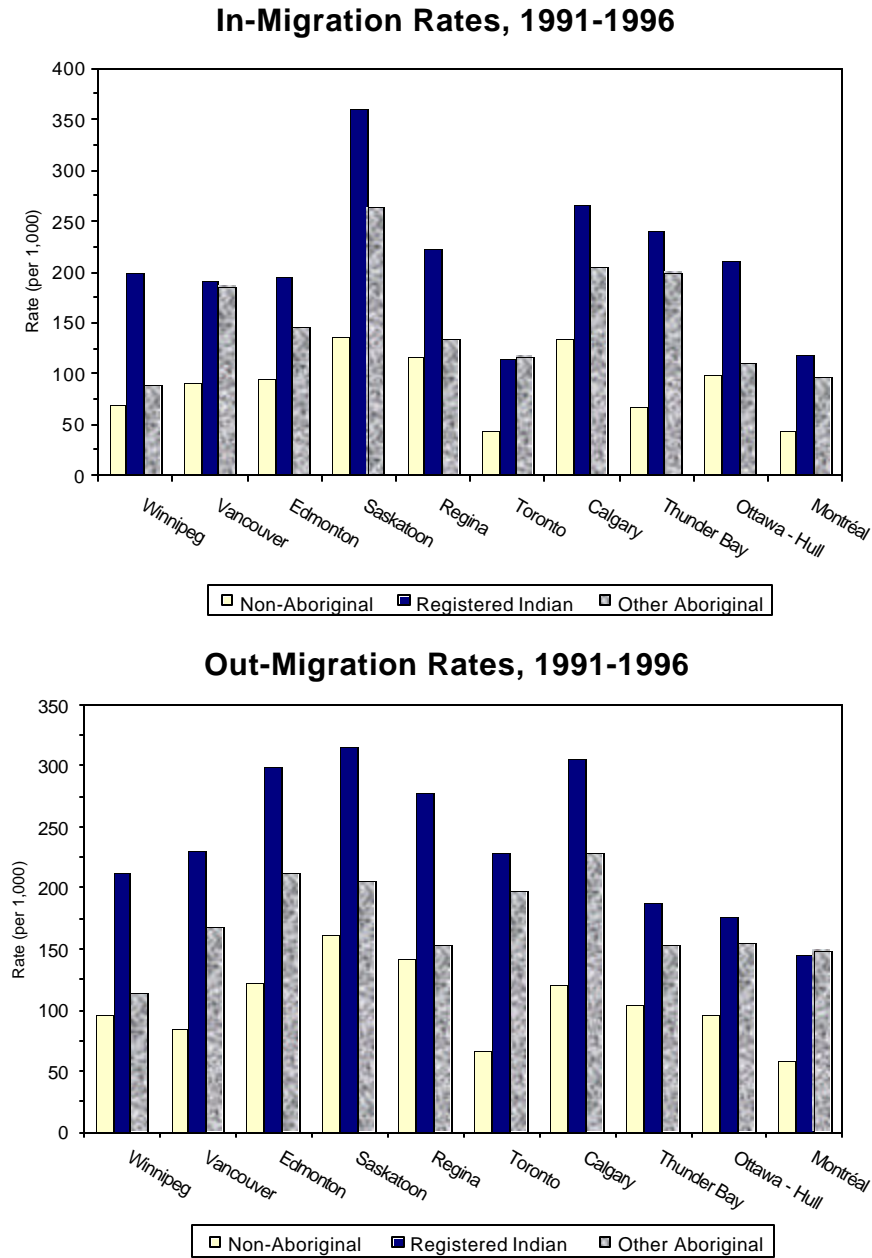


Source: Statistics Canada, special tabulations, 1996 Census of Canada.

An analysis of five-year rates of in- and out-migration to and from large census metropolitan areas (CMAs) also supports the observation of the higher mobility and migration of Registered Indians in comparison to other Aboriginal groups and Canadians. As shown for the top 10 CMAs based on Registered Indian population in Figure 18, Registered Indians consistently have the highest rates of both in- and out-migration, followed by other Aboriginal groups<sup>14</sup> and by Canadians in general. Most of these top 10 CMAs over the 1991-96 period generally posted net losses of Saskatoon and Thunder Bay which experienced net gains of Registered Indian and other Aboriginal migrants.

<sup>14</sup> Includes the Métis, the non-status Indians and the Inuit.

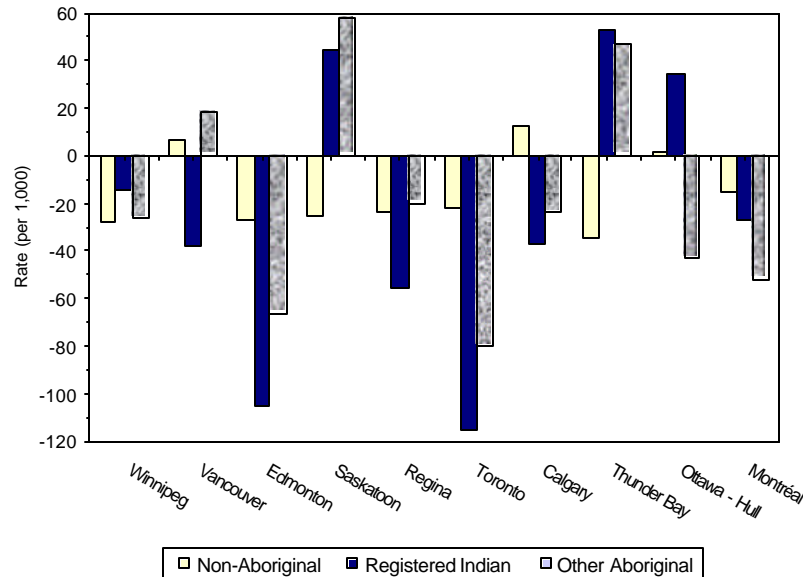
**Figure 18**  
**Migration Rates for Top Ten Canadian Cities, 1991-1996**



Source: Statistics Canada, special tabulations, 1996 Census of Canada.

**Figure 18 (concluded)**  
**Migration Rates for Top Ten Canadian Cities, 1991-1996**

**Net Migration Rates, 1991-1996**



Source: Statistics Canada, special tabulations, 1996 Census of Canada.

What is important to note with respect to migration to and from CMAs is not so much the impact of net migration - which is relatively small in any case for the 1991-96 period - but rather the “churn” represented by the relatively high Aboriginal rates of in- and out-migration, especially for the Registered Indian population. Again, reserves play a distinct role in the difference between Registered Indians and other Aboriginals in their migration patterns to and from reserves. In their roles as both origins and destinations, reserves contribute to the “churn” to and from cities, especially for cities with large reserve populations nearby. This can be demonstrated in the case of the Winnipeg CMA. Between 1991 and 1996, some 3,500 Registered Indians migrated to Winnipeg, yielding an in-migration rate of 20 migrants per 100 Registered Indians in Winnipeg, significantly higher than other Aboriginal groups and Canadian in-rates of 9 and 7 per hundred respectively. Similarly the out-migration rate of Registered Indians was 21 per 100, again notably higher than the corresponding rates of 11 and 10 for “other Aboriginal” and Canadians respectively. A large part of this difference in rates between Registered Indians and other groups is the impact of reserves. Over the 1991- 96 period, 27% of Registered Indian

migrants moving to Winnipeg came from reserves, while almost half, some 47%, of Registered Indians moving from Winnipeg were moving to reserves. Clearly, if the flows to and from Winnipeg in relation to reserves were removed, the rates of Registered Indians migration into and out from Winnipeg would be significantly lower and thereby more similar to other populations.

## 5 Conclusions

A popular myth is that there has been, and continues to be a large-scale migration of Aboriginal people out of reserve communities, and into urban areas in search of jobs and better living conditions. Analysis of 1996 Census data, and comparison with analyses of previous censuses demonstrates that this is not the dominant feature of Registered Indian migration in Canada. Migration of Registered Indians is an extremely dynamic process, being best characterized as bi-directional movement between reserves and large urban centres, rather than simply as migration into cities. Census data show relatively high rates of migration of Registered Indians to and from urban areas. Reserves have always been a source of migrants who leave in search of better educational or economic opportunities, and who move either permanently or on a temporary basis, but with this also comes a significant amount of migration in the opposite direction, as people return to reserve communities. People may move from urban centres to reserves because of the pull of family and friends, because of better housing or social conditions in their home communities, or for any number of other reasons. **What is critical is that movement of people to reserves from cities is at least as important as is movement in the opposite direction, which has historically received much more attention.**

In the case of reserves, census data have consistently shown a small net gain of migrants to reserves, not a net outflow. Unlike some migrants, such as international immigrants, Registered Indians usually do have a “home” community, the reserve, to which they can return. Furthermore, unlike other Aboriginal communities, reserves also provide benefits of social assistance and housing. It is such differences that cause Registered Indians to be distinct from Non-status Indians and Métis in terms of their settlement and migration patterns associated with reserves.

In terms of its contribution to population growth, the net effect of migration (in-migrants minus out-migrants) is far less significant than the contribution of natural increase (births minus deaths) and Bill C-31 reinstatements to the high growth rates of Registered Indians. In fact, while the rates of in- and out-migration of the Registered Indian population for urban areas are high, the net gains or losses in population due to migration are relatively low. In general, cities are not experiencing large net inflows of migrants from reserves, nor have they for some time.

While the growth of the urban Registered Indian population has not been due to migration, but rather to natural increase and changes in legal definitions of who is eligible to be registered, there are issues surrounding mobility that should be addressed. Migration is selective, and the characteristics in terms of age, sex, and family status of those who choose to move from one area to another affect the composition of the communities of origin and destination. It appears that females, younger families, and lone-parent families are over-represented in the migrant population, especially among migrants to the urban areas, such that the process of migration is contributing to larger concentrations of lone-parent families among the Aboriginal population in several major urban areas.

Migration may not be contributing to the redistribution of the Aboriginal population as much as is commonly thought, as shown by low net migration rates, but there are problems associated with the relatively higher level of mobility that are reflected in the high in- and out-migration rates. The Registered Indian population living off-reserve experiences higher mobility than the non-Aboriginal population. Census data have consistently shown that the Registered Indian population off-reserve is highly transient, moving to a greater extent than the general population, especially in the young adult age groups. This frequent mobility can have significant implications for the building of institutional completeness and capacity within communities, the social cohesion of communities, and the delivery of services such as education and housing. These problems may be exacerbated by the high proportion of female-headed lone-parent families among migrants to the city.

The mobility and migration patterns of Registered Indians suggest that there is relative stability on reserves for now, contrasted with the population off-reserve which is in a high state of flux. In the case of reserves, the housing situation and shortage of job opportunities in First Nation communities, combined with the growth of the working age population, could generate increasing pressures to migrate from reserves. Given the projected strong growth of the working age population, the importance of education and job training will increase in the future. This requirement for higher levels of education could also lead to greater out-migration from reserves. On the other hand, because of ageing, the Aboriginal population overall may become less transient and less inclined to relocate, even when living in cities and other non-Native communities off-reserve. However, this is difficult to predict. Many factors can affect future migration, such as economic and employment opportunities, housing availability on reserves, and educational levels.

Future research and policy directions with regards to the migration of Registered Indians need to focus more on the “churn” or “turbulence” (Chapman, 1978: 559) in urban communities, that results from both higher mobility among off-reserve

Registered Indians and the high amount of return mobility to reserves. This residential instability in cities can have serious implications for the service delivery and for cohesion within these communities. Despite the popular misconception of an exodus into cities from reserves, it is the frequency of migration, rather than the origin and destination of migration (e.g. from reserves to cities), that has the greatest implications for the well-being of Aboriginal people and communities.

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