Profile of Hamilton’s Aboriginal Residents

Hamilton’s border is just 10 kilometres from Canada’s largest reserve, Six Nations of the Grand River. In 2013, Six Nations had over 25,000 members, with 13,389 living off reserve, including a large number in Hamilton1. A small sub-section of this reserve is home to the Mississaugas of New Credit, with almost 2,000 members (including about half living off-reserve). The City of Hamilton itself is located on traditional Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Territory.

This report gives an overview of the demographics of Hamilton’s Aboriginal residents in order to better understand this important community. As noted in the SPRC’s *Hamilton’s Social Landscape* report, government statistics for the Aboriginal communities are not as reliable as for other communities2. Many Aboriginal communities, including Six Nations, have historically refused to participate in official survey and data gathering due to the mistrust created by centuries of federal and provincial laws and actions that have harmed Aboriginal people.

More recently, some Aboriginal leaders are seeing the value in being counted, arguing that missing data often leads to ignorance of issues that need urgent attention3. In 2011, for the first time Six Nations participated in the Census. That decision by the Six Nations Council was just a first step, as still only about half of the 12,000 residents on the Six Nations reserve completed the 2011 Census. Six Nations participation in the voluntary National Household Survey was even lower4.

These trends have important implications for data about Aboriginals living in Hamilton, as the political, cultural and family ties between Hamilton and Six Nations remain strong. The result is that government data about Aboriginals in Hamilton continues to underrepresent this community. This data is nonetheless used in this report, to give at least a general sense of community conditions for urban Aboriginals in Hamilton.

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4 The voluntary National Household Survey was introduced in 2011 as the replacement for the mandatory long-form Census and had produced lower quality data than available previously through the Census, especially at the community level and for smaller population groups. The SPRC follows the recommendation of the Social Planning Network of Ontario and only used NHS data when higher quality data is not available.
Population

Hamilton’s population of Aboriginal descent was approximately 15,840 in 2011 as counted by the National Household Survey, which is about 3.1% of Hamilton’s population. As explained in the introduction, the actual number of Aboriginals in Hamilton is probably larger.

In Canada overall, Aboriginal communities are growing more quickly than the general population and are substantially younger. Hamilton’s Aboriginal population is even younger than the average for Aboriginal communities across Ontario. The median age of Hamilton’s Aboriginal population is 30 years old, one year younger than Ontario’s Aboriginal residents’ median age (31) and more than a decade younger than Hamilton’s general population (median age of 41 years).

Among Hamilton’s Aboriginals, 87% are First Nations according to the NHS, which is a higher proportion than among Ontario’s Aboriginal residents (77%). An additional 13% of Hamilton’s Aboriginals are Mêtis and 1% are Inuit. A 2014 survey of 310 Aboriginal participants at National Aboriginal Day events conducted by the SPRC showed that 40% were born in Hamilton, 21% were born on the Six Nations reserve, and 13% were born in remote Northern Ontario communities.

Sixties Scoop

In the age distribution of Hamilton’s population of Aboriginal descent, the effect of the ‘sixties scoop’ may be seen. Hamilton’s Aboriginals population aged 45 to 49 (who were born from 1961 to 1966) is substantially larger than the age groups immediately older and younger. After the start of the dismantling of Canada’s residential school system for Aboriginal children, the 1960s was the height of a common practice by child welfare agencies to remove Aboriginal children from their families, usually without parental or band consent. Most of these children were placed in non-Aboriginal homes. The larger group of persons of Aboriginal descent in Hamilton aged 45 to 49 may be traced back to the adoption of a large number of young children from the Six Nations reserve or other Aboriginal communities across Canada into Hamilton and surrounding areas. “Just as the closing of the residential schools did not mean their legacy of suffering instantly vanished, so the end of the Sixties Scoop did not mean that all the native adoptees who were farmed out to abusive or alienating non-native families suddenly found themselves with a clear-cut identity or a secure place in society.” The family and cultural trauma caused by Canada’s residential school system and the Sixties Scoop has led to higher rates of addiction and poverty rates in Aboriginal communities across Canada, and continues to negatively impact Aboriginal families and children today.

The Aboriginal Healing Foundation’s analysis of the impacts of residential schools also helps to understand the lasting effects of the Sixties Scoop: “The relational theory of human development is particularly useful in understanding the full scope of the impacts of this aspect of residential schooling on generations of Aboriginal families…. Just as food, water and air nurture the body, relationships and feelings of connectedness nourish the heart, mind and spirit. In this model of human development, the deep yearning and movement toward connection is seen as a central force in a healthy life, while traumatic disconnection is understood as the source of most human suffering…. Chronic poverty, under-education and ongoing prejudice are all part of the reality of life for Aboriginal people in Canada today. Such living conditions and their attendant health and social problems compound the long-term impacts of historical, unresolved trauma.”

NHS data shows that about one quarter of Hamilton’s Aboriginals have registered treaty status (24%, compared to 32% among Ontario’s Aboriginals). This figure is seen as an underrepresentation of the true number, as many Aboriginals reject the Indian Act status regulations for political and cultural reasons, even if they technically may fit the legislation’s definitions6.

Chart 1. Age groups of Aboriginals in Hamilton and Ontario, compared to Hamilton’s general population

Data source: Statistics Canada, 2011 Census

Chart 2. Indian Act groups among Hamilton and Ontario’s Aboriginal residents

Data source: Statistics Canada, 2011 NHS

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Education and Employment

Hamilton’s Aboriginal residents aged 25 to 64 have had lower levels of education than Hamilton’s general population. Almost one quarter of Aboriginal persons in Hamilton in this age group have not completed high school (24%), compared to 13% among Hamilton’s residents overall and 22% among Ontario’s Aboriginal residents. A full 52% of Hamilton’s Aboriginals aged 25-64 have completed some post-secondary education, but this is lower than the average for Ontario’s Aboriginals (53%) and Hamilton’s general population (62%). The rate of apprenticeships and trade certificates and college education is higher in Hamilton’s Aboriginal population than the other groups, but university education is much less common.

A further analysis of education by gender reveals overall similar trends in Aboriginal and the general population with women generally completing more post-secondary education than men.

The data on top occupations and industries shows that Aboriginal women in Hamilton are often working in sales, food service, and health care and social services. Hamilton’s Aboriginal men are most often working in trades occupations in construction and manufacturing, as well as sales and service occupations and in transportation and warehousing. Many of these occupations and industries have higher rates jobs that involve shift work and changing schedules, and/ or short-term contracts with few benefits and lower than average wages. These ‘precarious jobs’ have been shown to contribute to ill-health and reduced quality of life for workers.8

Poverty Rates

The poverty rate of Aboriginal residents in Hamilton is 29%, according to the 2011 NHS, using the Low Income Measure as a poverty line.9 This rate is higher than both the average for Aboriginals in Ontario (24%) and the general population in Hamilton (16%). Among children, who account for about one third of Hamilton’s Aboriginal residents, the poverty rate climbs to 37%, compared to 28% for Aboriginals in Ontario, and 21% for Hamilton’s general population. Aboriginal seniors in Hamilton have a poverty rate of 20%, more than double the average for Hamilton’s senior population (8%).

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9 This data cannot be compared to similar data from the 2006 Census because the 2006 Census used the LICO, not the LIM as the poverty line.
Housing and Homelessness

The 2011 *Our Health Counts: Urban Aboriginal Health Database Research Project* report detailed health, housing, family and income conditions of Hamilton’s First Nations residents. The research found that 90% of Hamilton’s First Nations residents moved at least once in the last 5 years and over 50% moved three times or more in the last five years.

Housing instability is also reflected in the high rate of Aborigi-nals among Hamilton’s homeless population. A recent City of Hamilton report reviewed multiple data sources that showed about 20% of Hamilton’s residents who experience home-lessness are Aboriginal.

A recent SPRC survey of 129 homeless individuals in downtown Hamilton found about half were of Aboriginal ancestry. The under 25 and the 45-54 age group showed a greater number of Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal residents experiencing homelessness, which could be in part a reflection of the effects of the Sixties Scoop (see sidebar) and their de-scendants. About half of the Aboriginal survey respondents had been homeless for less than 6 months, with the remain-der experiencing long period of homelessness, including 35% stating they had been homeless for over two years. This survey also showed that Aboriginal people experiencing homelessness were less likely to use shelters (47% were currently staying in a shelter, compared to 61% of non-Aboriginal survey respondents). Among the Aboriginal survey respondents experiencing homelessness, 20% were staying temporarily with others (couch surfing) and other precarious and provisional housing – or as one put it: “whatever I find”.

There is a long tradition in the Aboriginal community to help extended family and friends who are experiencing homeless-ness. A 2014 survey of 455 people attending Hamilton’s Na-tional Aboriginal Day festivites showed that 39% of Aborigi-nal residents had helped a homeless person in the last two years by giving them a place to stay in their home, compared to 26% of non-Aboriginal survey respondents.

### Chart 7. Age groups of persons experiencing homelessness in downtown Hamilton, by Aboriginal status

Data source: SPRC All We Need is Community Urban Aboriginal Homelessness Survey, 2015

Survey gathered responses from 69 Aboriginal and 60 non-Aboriginal persons experiencing homelessness in downtown Hamilton on February 18, 2015.

### Policies and practices to improve health, social and economic conditions of Hamilton’s Aboriginal residents

*Our Health Counts: Urban Aboriginal Health Database Research Project* findings highlighted the differences in health outcomes of Hamilton’s First Nations compared to the general population, with First Nations residents experiencing much higher rates of chronic diseases and use of hospital emergency rooms. The findings have important implications for policy and the *Our Health Counts* report included the following recommendations to improve the health, social and economic outcomes of Aboriginals living in urban areas like Hamilton.

- Government engage with Aboriginal communities to take steps to address health inequities due to poverty, homelessness, food insecurity, education, employment, health access, gender quality and social safety. More specifically that the Ministry of Health and Long-term Care engage with Aboriginal communities and organizations to address the critical need for more affordable housing with supports.
- Governments commit to stable funding for Aboriginal services and organizations to develop priorities, preventative actions and promotion plans to reduce the burden of chronic displease and disability in the urban Aboriginal community and reduce barriers in access to health and hospital services.
- Funding for Aboriginal-led cultural programming, traditional family treatments centres, and mental health and mater-nal health strategies.
- Development of Aboriginal-led cultural competency and cultural safety training for health care workers.
- Governments recognize and validate the Aboriginal cultural worldview that encompasses the physical, mental emo-tional, spiritual, and social-well-being of Aboriginal individuals and communities) and that self-determination is funda-mental and thus Aboriginal people must have full involvement in and choice in health care delivery, planning govern-ance and evaluation.
- The clear need for more urban Aboriginal research and services must be addressed by governments in collaboration with urban Aboriginal organizations.
- More coordination among Aboriginal service providers and supported by governments.