

Our People

The population of Nunavut is scattered over the largest of Canada's territories. Its 26 000 inhabitants live in 28 communities spread out over an area of 2 million square kilometres, or roughly one person per 100 square kilometres. The Inuit have occupied the region for thousands of years and form almost 85 percent of the current population.

Nunavut's society is the youngest in Canada, with half the population under 21. The territory's students were thus invited to participate in this module by telling us about their community and their hopes for the future.

This section gives us an overview of the people of Nunavut. Two maps illustrate this sub-theme, the Aboriginal Culture Zones and the Communities of Nunavut.

History and Culture

The Inuit are descendants of the Thule, who came from Asia and lived in the Arctic for thousands of years. Through a traditional way of life over many generations, the Inuit have developed an in-depth knowledge of the ecosystems in which they live. To survive in this glacial land, they observe and interpret wildlife behaviour, weather patterns and other environmental factors. Aside from hunting, Inuit have traditionally spent hours observing and then discussing animals and the land. Lessons were learned, and the knowledge base became fine-tuned through direct experience of a subsistence lifestyle.

A basic tenet of Inuit culture is that humans and other animals are equals and that all have souls and spirit powers. This respect for wild animals led the Inuit to learn how to use wildlife resources without destroying them so as to conserve them for future generations. The passing on of knowledge from one generation to the next and the teachings of elders have resulted in a huge reservoir of information that has helped to guide the development of the sharing philosophy, to shape laws and customs, and to promote the value of sustainable living.

Change in the traditional Inuit way of life began to accelerate in the 1800s, with intensification of the whaling industry and arrival of missionaries intent on the conversion of the Inuit to Christianity. Rather than travelling inland in summer, Inuit began to stay on the coast with the European whalers, where they were often hired as pilots, crew, seamstresses and hunters.

The beginning of the 20th century coincided with the end of the commercial whale hunt. The whaling industry was quickly replaced by the fur trade. In the eastern Arctic, Arctic fox formed the basis of Inuit-European commerce, and ringed seal remained the basis of subsistence. The fur trade began to decline in the late 1930s.

However, by the early 1920s, virtually all Inuit were living near a trading post, foregoing their nomadic lifestyle.

A wide variety of technological advances affected the Inuit's culture and traditional lifestyle during the 20th century. Most hunting and fishing is now carried out using snowmobiles, outboard motorboats and all-terrain vehicles. These new modes of transportation increased the range at which hunters could function away from the community; they have not, however, compensated for the effect moving people from camps into settlements had on land use. The Inuit still use less total hunting area than when they practised a nomadic lifestyle².

Demographics

The population of Nunavut is the youngest in Canada. Over half the population is under 21. Compare the Age Pyramid (Figure 1), created using data from the 1996 census, with the one for Canada as a whole.

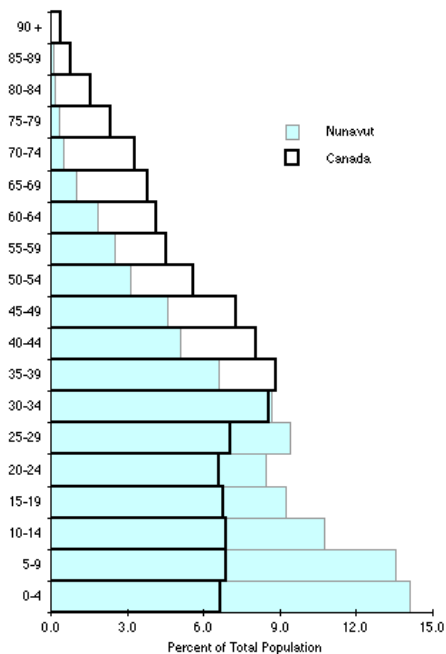


Figure 1. Age Pyramid for Nunavut and Canada, 1996

Sources: Statistics Canada 1996 Census

This young population is growing faster than the population of Canada as a whole. Between the 1981 and 1996 censuses, the population of Nunavut increased by 59%. Figure 2 shows that the population of Nunavut is ageing, although more slowly than the rest of the Canadian population. This is due in part to Nunavut's birth rate of 30%, compared with 12% for the rest of Canada (1996). The life expectancy for

Nunavut is 67 for men and 72 for women; for the rest of Canada, the life expectancy is 75 for men and 81 for women¹.

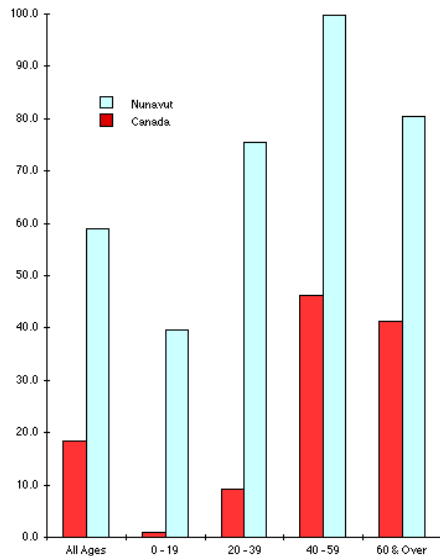


Figure 2. Percent Population Growth by Age Category
Source: Statistics Canada 1996 Census

Families

Families in Nunavut are bigger than in the South. The average of 2.3 children per family is the highest in Canada. The average number of people per household is 3.9, while the number of people per census family is 4.1. There are also a large number of single-parent families and the number of families composed of couples living common law is higher than the Canadian average.

Languages

Inuktitut is the language most frequently spoken at home and the mother tongue of 72% of the population. English, with 24% of the population, is the second most frequent mother tongue. Mother tongue is defined as the first language learned and still understood at the time of the census. Some 80% of the population of Nunavut speaks an Aboriginal language and 81% say they know English, which makes a large proportion of the population bilingual, since they speak both an Aboriginal language and English. However, 15% of the population speaks only an Aboriginal language¹. In Nunavut, there are 7 main dialects, 17 sub-dialects and 2 writing systems⁴.

Education

Sixty-one percent of 15-to-19-year olds are in schools, as are a third of 20-to-24-year olds. These figures are lower than those for Canada as a whole. However, the number of Inuit high-school graduates has increased significantly, from 5% in 1990 to 12% at the end of 1994. The number of Inuit registered in post-secondary courses has also increased considerably, from 30 in 1984 to 329 in 1994⁴. There are primary and secondary schools in every community, and Nunavut Arctic College has campuses in Iqaluit, Rankin Inlet and Cambridge Bay.

Working Population

The Northwest Territories Labour Force Survey³ shows that 66% of the population of Nunavut is working and 21.5% of the population is unemployed. Nunavut's economy is characterised by a dependence on the primary sector, a growing service sector, and practically no manufacturing sector. Many Inuit families supplement their income with fishing and hunting.

References

¹ 1996 Population Census.

² The Inuit Economy - Sustaining a Way of Life in The State of the Environment Fact Sheet Series

³ 1994 NWT Labour Force Survey.

⁴ Footprints 2: A second comprehensive report from the Nunavut Implementation Commission to the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Government of the Northwest Territories and Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated concerning the establishment of the Nunavut government.