

*Aboriginal Populations: Social, Demographic
and Epidemiological Perspectives*

edited by Frank Trovato and Anatole Romaniuk

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The study of the health and social conditions of Aboriginal peoples is inherently interdisciplinary and multi-perspectival. In this highly politicized field of inquiry, important thinking is brought to bear by historians, sociologists, economists, political scientists, and specialists working in Native Studies departments, as well as those in government and Aboriginal advocacy and political organizations.

One viewpoint that is often not given sufficient attention is that which takes populations as the unit of primary interest. As useful as it can be to examine the experiences of particular communities and groups, or to evaluate local programs or initiatives, it is equally important to consider the dynamics and trends at the population level for at least two reasons. One is that only by looking at (and measuring) aggregate conditions over time can we understand how the overall health and socioeconomic well-being of Aboriginal peoples have changed, and then go on to understand these changes relative to various historical, cultural, and political dynamics. The other is that these macro-level changes themselves are an important but often ignored element of context for many of the local and community-based inquiries. Understanding populations and the processes that affect them can be critical for the success of local programs or initiatives, in ways that are as important as understanding the characteristics of local communities.

To that end, Trovato and Romaniuk have collected papers, some previously published in different forms and some new, authored by scholars in demography, sociology, epidemiology, and public health and related disciplines, focusing on the level of populations rather than on particular communities. The bulk of the book is oriented toward Canadian First Nations, Inuit, and Métis populations, but in addition to the demographic, social, and epidemiological sections that the title suggests, it includes a fourth section of international perspectives, with papers on Maori, American Indians and Alaska Natives, Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, and circumpolar populations. Among the chapters are demographic discussions of population growth and change, sociological effects of mortality decline, population projections and migration and mobility, considerations of the place of Aboriginal populations in an epidemiological transition, and sociological perspectives on language use and the revitalization of Aboriginal cultures and identities. Their authors are all widely recognized Canadian and international experts, many of whom are senior scholars in their areas, as are the editors. The chapters benefit from the broad experience of Malcolm King, Jim Frideres, Evelyn Peters, T. Kue Young, and C. Matthew Snipp, among the many other contributors.

In addition to the consistent attention to population, the other great strength of this book is its use of empirical evidence. Most of the chapters are empirical, either presenting data themselves or providing insightful commentary on the processes that generate them or on their implications. An excellent example of this is the discussion, to some degree a debate within the book, about the growth of the Métis and non-Status First Nations population in Canada and the fundamental reasons for it. The chapter by Goldmann and Delic provides

much-needed insight into the changes to the census and the complexity of enumerating Aboriginal populations in the context of legal and definitional changes. Guimond, Robitaille, and Senécal give evidence of “ethnic mobility,” and the individual and inter-generational changes in Aboriginal identification. Chris Andersen gives an alternative interpretation of the phenomenon, one based not on changing patterns of self-identification but instead on the historical and contemporary lack of congruence between official definitions, such as those used in the census, and people’s definitions of themselves and their communities. Peters, Maaka, and Laliberté examine the complexity among urban Aboriginal communities, and suggest that particular cultural identities may be gaining importance relative to previous identification as simply “First Nations” or “Aboriginal.” Taken together, these chapters do an excellent job of examining one of the most important dynamics of contemporary Aboriginal populations in Canada, highlighting its theoretical and empirical complexity.

A chapter that stands out for its clear-eyed interpretation of the existing evidence is Romaniuk’s paper on the historical changes to Aboriginal populations, from pre-contact equilibrium through the decimation as a result of imported diseases and displacement to high post-war fertility and contemporary population growth. The evidence about the size and mortality and morbidity of Aboriginal populations in North America before European contact and in the period shortly afterward is obviously incomplete and has become an area of contestation, with some claims being made for political reasons. Romaniuk does an admirable job of reviewing archaeological evidence and early accounts to present a “sympathetically objective” account of a pre-transition population with surprisingly low fertility, and health status commensurate with existing environmental, technological, and social conditions. This should not be seen as minimizing the effects of colonization—many of which were intentional and harmful, but which also included the unintended casting of reserves as cultural homelands, enabling assimilation to be resisted. Although he gives less attention to Métis and Inuit than to First Nations, Romaniuk’s is an excellent and careful treatment of a sensitive topic.

Although some of the chapters are re-statements of previously published ideas or analyses, it is indeed useful to have these presented with greater consideration of their implications at the population level, as is Michael Chandler’s work on cultural continuity. Whitehead and Kobayashi consider Whitehead’s previous work regarding the appropriate level of intervention for alcohol prevention programs, and contrast their community-focused approach to the macro-level concerns of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. Other work, such as Clatworthy and Norris’ review of their previous research on migration, is important to include because these patterns have not yet become widely understood and accepted, and therefore deserve recapitulating.

Aboriginal populations in Canada and elsewhere are in the midst of several important transitions, and this book provides a thoughtful and evidence-based treatment of the demographic, social, and epidemiological dynamics underlying them, as well as some of their potential implications. It also draws attention to some of the limitations of the existing data, and will hopefully add to a discussion about the sources of data on Aboriginal populations. Putting these perspectives together in a single volume is a clear contribution to academic and policy-oriented research on Aboriginal populations, and the chapters are likely to be widely cited by those doing such work. The only negative point worth mentioning is that in some chapters there are more small typographical errors than one would expect; certainly these are the publisher’s responsibility.