

The Missing Thousands

The Missing Thousands: How Census Undercounts Are Shortchanging Winnipeg's Indigenous Communities

Every five years, Statistics Canada tries to count everyone living in the country. For most of Winnipeg, that count is reasonably reliable. But for a large and growing share of the city's population — its First Nations and Métis residents — mounting evidence suggests the census is missing people by the tens of thousands. The gap isn't a rounding error. It may be one of the largest population undercounts in any Canadian city, and it's quietly distorting how governments plan and fund everything from housing to healthcare.

What the official numbers say

According to the 2021 Census, Winnipeg is home to roughly 91,000 Indigenous people within city limits, about 12.4% of the population — the largest urban Indigenous population, in absolute terms, of any city in Canada. Across the wider metro area, that figure rises to just over 102,000. Those numbers already represented growth: Winnipeg's Indigenous population was reported at about 92,800 in the 2016 census before the 2021 count put the metro figure above 102,000, a increase driven partly by natural growth and partly by more people identifying as Indigenous.

On paper, that looks like a well-documented, thriving population. The trouble is that a growing body of independent research suggests the real number is dramatically higher.

A population three times larger than the official count

The most striking evidence comes from a peer-reviewed study using the "Our Health Counts" methodology, developed specifically to address the

known weaknesses of census data collection among Indigenous people in cities. Researchers working with the First Nations Health and Social Secretariat of Manitoba surveyed First Nations and Métis residents of Winnipeg using respondent-driven sampling — a technique designed to reach people who are systematically missed by traditional door-to-door or mail-in census methods.

Their conclusion: an estimated 300,000 First Nations and Métis people live in Winnipeg, more than three times the 2021 Census figure of roughly 90,500. Even the lower bound of their confidence interval, about 248,000, is nearly triple the official count. Just over half of survey participants said they had actually completed the census, and researchers calculated an “under-reporting factor” suggesting the true population could be more than double what standard adjustment methods would predict.

What this means for Winnipeg’s total population

The 2021 Census puts Winnipeg’s total city population at 749,607 (834,678 across the wider metro area). That figure includes the official Indigenous count of about 90,990 people.

If the Our Health Counts estimate is substituted for the official Indigenous count — leaving every other part of the census count unchanged — Winnipeg’s adjusted total population comes out to roughly **958,600**, compared with the official **749,607**. Using the study’s 95% confidence interval (248,000 to 379,000 Indigenous residents), that adjusted total could plausibly range from about **906,600 to 1,037,600**. In other words, on this estimate, Winnipeg may already be a city of close to a million people rather than three-quarters of a million — a gap of roughly 25% to 38%.

That figure comes with an important caveat: it assumes the non-Indigenous portion of the census count is accurate and that the Our Health Counts sampling — conducted in a defined study area within Winnipeg — scales cleanly to the whole city. Statistics Canada’s own adjustment methods produce far smaller undercount estimates, and the agency has cautioned that a one-time survey is not the same instrument as a full census. Still, even a fraction of the gap implied by the Our

Health Counts figures would meaningfully change how large a city Winnipeg actually is.

This isn't a Winnipeg-only phenomenon. Similar "Our Health Counts" studies in Toronto found the city's Indigenous population had been undercounted by a factor of two to four, and Ontario cities like Thunder Bay and Kenora have seen studies suggesting undercounts two to four times the official figures, prompting municipal leaders there to publicly push provincial governments for funding adjustments.

Why the census misses so many people

Several overlapping factors help explain the gap:

- **Housing instability and mobility.** People without a fixed address, living in overcrowded households, staying temporarily with family, or experiencing homelessness are structurally harder for a mail-based or door-knocking census to reach — and Indigenous people in Winnipeg experience housing insecurity at markedly higher rates than the general population.
- **Mistrust of government institutions.** Given the historical role of federal data collection in policies like residential schools and the Sixties Scoop, some Indigenous respondents are understandably wary of identifying themselves to a federal agency.
- **A single-day snapshot.** Statistics Canada's census attempts to capture where everyone was on one specific date. Researchers who spend months or a year in the field, like the Our Health Counts teams, argue that this design inherently misses populations with irregular or transient living situations.
- **Survey design and sampling.** Historically, only a portion of households received the long-form questionnaire that asks about Indigenous identity, with statistical weighting used to estimate the full picture — a method that can compound existing gaps if the sampled group isn't representative.

Statistics Canada does not dispute that undercounting occurs and applies its own adjustment methods; the agency has previously noted that net undercoverage nationally has been measured at around 2–3%, but higher

in specific cities and demographic groups such as young adult men. Independent researchers argue those official adjustments still fall far short of the scale suggested by ground-level survey work.

Why it matters for how the city is run

An undercount isn't just an academic curiosity — it has real consequences for the people being missed.

Funding formulas. Many provincial and municipal funding envelopes — for policing, social services, public health, and infrastructure — are calculated on a per-capita basis. Municipal officials in cities like Thunder Bay have said publicly that an undercounted population directly translates into underfunded services, because budgets are built around numbers that don't reflect how many people actually need them.

Housing and homelessness planning. If a substantial share of Winnipeg's Indigenous population is undercounted precisely because they are experiencing housing instability, that's a troubling feedback loop: the people most likely to need housing supports are also the people least likely to be counted when governments decide how many housing supports to build.

Health system planning. Hospital and clinic capacity, culturally specific health programming, and preventive care initiatives are often sized to projected demand. A population that is systematically underestimated is a population whose future healthcare needs are also being underestimated.

Political representation and visibility. Population counts inform everything from electoral boundaries to which communities get flagged as priorities in provincial and federal planning documents. An undercounted community is, in a very literal sense, less visible to the governments meant to serve it.

A recognized, unresolved problem

None of this is new to researchers or, increasingly, to local officials. Studies going back over a decade — in Toronto, Thunder Bay, Kenora,

and now Winnipeg — have consistently found that ground-level survey methods turn up far more Indigenous residents than the official census does, sometimes by a factor of two, three, or four. What's changed is the growing weight of evidence specific to Winnipeg, a city that already has the largest urban Indigenous population in the country on paper — and, if the newer research holds up, a substantially larger one in reality.

For a city where roughly one in eight residents identifies as Indigenous by the official count, and possibly closer to one in three or four by independent estimates, the gap between who is counted and who is actually there isn't a statistical footnote. It's a policy problem with a direct line to whether Winnipeg's housing, health, and social systems are built to the right scale in the first place.

This article was drafted with AI assistance (Claude, Anthropic) for davidjamesshaver.online, based on publicly available Statistics Canada data and peer-reviewed research cited above.

Sources: Statistics Canada, 2021 Census of Population (Focus on Geography Series, Winnipeg); City of Winnipeg 2021 Census Data; CBC News; "The Right to Be Counted: Unmasking First Nations and Métis Population Undercounts in Winnipeg, Manitoba" (International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health); "Our Health Counts" research (York University / St. Michael's Hospital); CBC coverage of Thunder Bay and Kenora undercount studies.