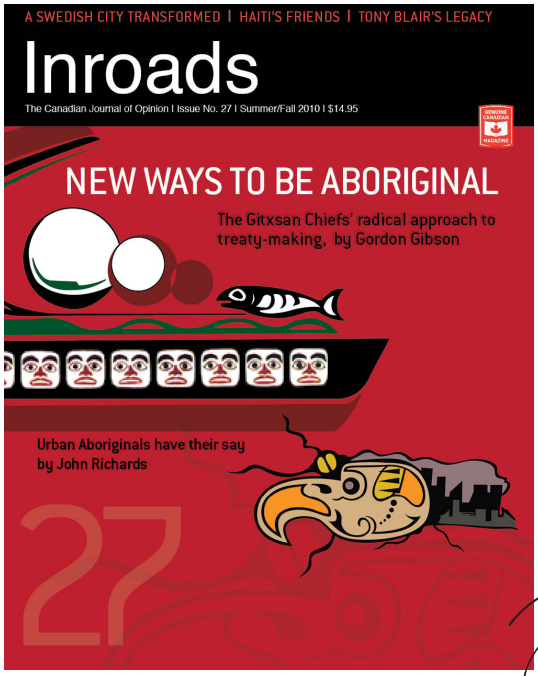
It is our pleasure to make this article from Inroads 27 available to you free of charge.

Please consider a subscription (or a small donation) to help us to continue to provide timely, thought-provoking articles in print – and often on-line – to readers across Canada and beyond.



On the last page, you will find information about subscribing. You can print it out or just send us an email or give us a call. Or you can subscribe on-line.

www.inroadsjournal.ca

Check out our website to find out more about Inroads, our special anniversary issue, and our other back issues.

Thanks.

A WORD ABOUT PRINTING THIS ARTICLE: These pages are intended to print on legal (8.5 x 14 inch) paper, two pages per sheet, in a horizontal landscape. Pages can also printed onto letter sized paper at a reduced size.

A study that makes urban Aboriginals visible

by John Richards

John Richards, co-publisher of Inroads, was a member of the advisory circle for the Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study.

In April, Environics Institute released an ambitious study of urban Aboriginals across Canada, in which I played a small role as one of 20 members of the advisory circle. Widely quoted in the national media in the days that followed release was this two-sentence summary by the study's project manager, Ginger Gosnell-Myers:

> *When urban Aboriginal peoples are researched, it's often about problems like homelessness and sexual exploitation. There are hundreds of thousands of us living in cities, and there are a lot of positive things happening in our communities; it's not all crises.*

That sums it up nicely. She is not saying that urban Aboriginals have abandoned their heritage: overall, 77 per cent said they are "very proud" to be Aboriginal. But 71 per cent consider the city in which they live to be "home," and 65 per cent like living in their city "a lot." Only 22 per cent plan to go back to their "community of origin" – as opposed to 50 per cent who intend to stay; the remainder have yet to decide.

The study involved lengthy interviews, one to two hours in length, with 2,600 Aboriginals living in 11 cities from

Halifax to Vancouver. Initiator of the study was Michael Adams, cofounder of Environics polling company and founder of the Environics Institute. Ginger, a student in the graduate public policy program at Simon Fraser University, interrupted her studies to serve as project manager.

The advisory circle first met for three days in Winnipeg in the fall of 2008 to thrash out the survey questions. We organized individual questions under four overarching themes:

- *identity:* who are you?
- *experiences:* what's your everyday like?
- *values:* what's important in your life?
- *aspirations:* what do you want for your future?

A year later members of the circle met, again in Winnipeg, to pass judgement on the report's first draft.

Between these two meetings, the actual survey was conducted. In each city the Environics Institute engaged a small team of local Native people to construct a 250-person sample and organize interviews of one to two hours' length with each person in it – an ambitious undertaking. Key to the study's legitimacy was that the sample be representative: that it not select solely among those living in serious poverty or those who are succeeding. If Statistics Canada were conducting the survey, it could identify all 300,000 Aboriginals living in these 11 cities and then choose a random sample, but the Institute does not have the same resources. What we knew was the census profile of Aboriginals in each city, so each city's sample was constructed on a "snowball" basis to find people, age 18 and over, such that the completed sample would match what the 2006 census had revealed about that city's Aboriginal population in terms of age, gender, education levels and distribution between those identifying as Métis and those identifying as First Nation. This was the procedure in 10 of 11 cities. In Ottawa, the procedure was different: the sample was restricted to those identifying as Inuit.

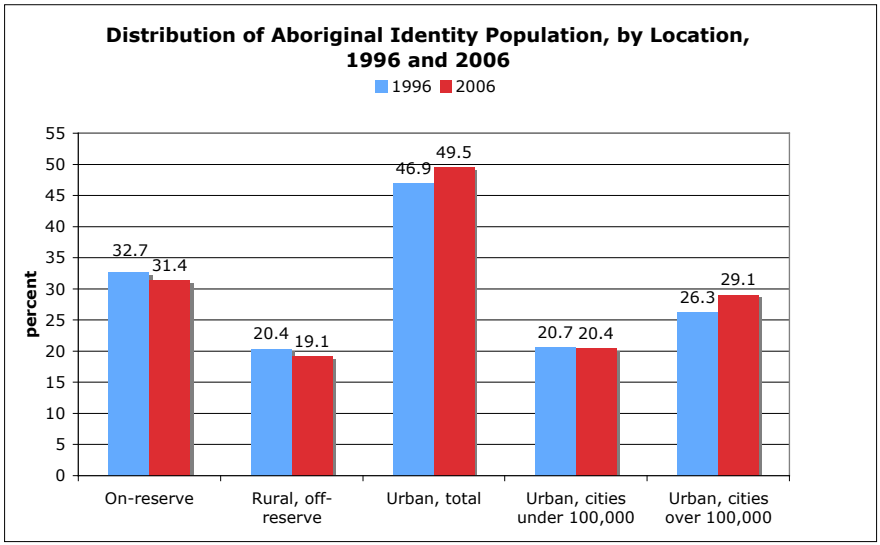
In addition to the basic survey, Environics also surveyed by telephone 2,500 non-Aboriginals on their attitudes toward urban Aboriginals. Finally, the study surveyed online nearly 200 National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation scholars.

Strangers in these parts

Several years ago David Newhouse and Evelyn Peters, two other members of the advisory circle, edited a book of essays about the urban Aboriginal experience entitled *Not Strangers in These Parts*. There was more hope than reality in the choice of title. In terms of realpolitik, urban Aboriginals *are* strangers. They are largely invisible to the country's journalists, academics, politicians – and, unfortunately, to many Aboriginal leaders. Rendering urban Aboriginals visible in the eyes of all Canadians is an obvious priority, for two major reasons.

First, urban Canadians should be interested in the hopes and fears of their new neighbours. Urban Aboriginals now number over 600,000, fully half of the total Aboriginal population (see Figure 1). They comprise an important component of multicultural urban Canada, especially in prairie cities. Significant

Figure 1



migration of Aboriginals to cities began a half century ago, but most urban Aboriginals are first generation (68 per cent), as opposed to second (22 per cent) or third (9 per cent). When asked why they came to the city, three reasons emerged with equal frequency: to be closer to family members already in the city, to have better access to education options for themselves and their children, and to get a job.

Second, if urban Aboriginals become more visible – and this study is a major attempt to achieve that visibility – urban Aboriginal leaders can insist more effectively on their concerns. Chiefs and Councils, and their organizations such as the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), are highly visible representatives of on-Reserve First Nations. However, few urban Aboriginals perceive the Assembly or Métis National Council as their representatives. Nor are they much impressed by mainstream political parties. In response to the question, "Thinking about both Aboriginal political organizations and Canadian political parties, is there one that you feel best represents you?", 13 per cent identified the Assembly, 10 per cent the Council, and 26 per cent one of the mainstream national parties. Over 40 per cent identified no organization.

Pride, happiness and hopes

Here are what I think to be a few more key results arising from this study. But I urge you to read the full report and draw your own conclusions.[1]

I referred above to the high proportion responding that they were "very proud" to be Aboriginal. Another indicator of pride is that 79 per cent insist they never downplay their Aboriginal identity. Nonetheless, 70 per cent agreed with the statement, "I have been

teased or insulted because of my Aboriginal background" and 36 per cent with the statement, "I don't feel accepted by non-Aboriginal people."

The majority may like living in their city but, as with other communities, "level of happiness with your life" varies in predictable ways. For example, employment matters. Among full-time workers, 72 per cent are "very happy." This statistic falls to 50 per cent for those with part-time work, and 34 per cent for the unemployed. A sense of cultural and family connectedness also matters. Among those who know their family tree well, 70 per cent are "very happy"; among those who have no knowledge of it, only 43 per cent are.

Hopes expressed for the next generation are important. In response to the question, "Are there ways in which you hope your children's and grandchildren's lives will be different from yours?", the most frequent responses were to learn the importance of education, to be more connected and aware of their cultural community, and to live in a society without discrimination.

The importance of schools

In terms of measures Canadian governments can take to improve Aboriginal conditions, a sustained attack on the multiple barriers limiting Aboriginal education success in K–12 education is probably the most important. I do not mean to dismiss the importance of postsecondary education, but K–12 is the necessary foundation.

Among the barriers is inadequate attention paid to Aboriginal cultural heritage in school curricula. Only 8 per cent reported learning "a lot" about Aboriginal people, history and culture in elementary school, and only 9 per cent during their high school years. This statistic rose dramatically, to 29 per cent, among those who attended college or university. This higher percentage obviously reflects student choice as much as course offerings.

There is some recognition from the non-Aboriginal telephone survey that this barrier exists, and that non-Aboriginal school children too should learn about Aboriginal matters. A slight majority, 53 per cent, think it "very important" to understand the history and culture of Aboriginals, and 63 per cent conclude that school performance on this measure is "only fair" or "poor."

It was a privilege to be part of this study. Whatever the accomplishments of Reserve leadership in resurrecting Reserve-based institutions over the past generation, my conviction is that the largely unheralded accomplishments of urban Aboriginals are more important. Over the next generation, the hopes and fears of urban Aboriginals – their journalism, novels, plays, films, songs and paintings – will define Canada to a far greater extent than most of us have acknowledged. My wish is that this creativity will reflect primarily hopes realized, and not the fears.

Note

[1] The study is available online at http://uaps.ca/

No half measures.

Every issue of Inroads is chock full of intelligent, approachable analysis of Canadian and world events.

regular subscriptions • 2 years (4 issues) • $48

students $36 (2 years) • institutions $60

single issue $15 plus shipping

Complimentary copy of the special retrospective Inroads 21 with every paid new subscription.

www.inroadsjournal.ca