

Thoughtful Population Projections Strengthen First Nations Planning

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This article argues that the standard approach to projecting population growth of First Nations used by consultants today is not only flawed but detrimental to the planning process. Ultimately, encouraging greater discretion in this practice and advocating for First Nations to steward their own demographic data.

As Planners, we fundamentally prepare for an uncertain future using current and historical information about communities. Having access to accurate and reliable data is critical for ensuring sufficient resources are distributed to support tomorrow's plans. Population demographics are key in this process, enabling Planners to project likely future scenarios. However, for those of us who work closely with First Nations, this crucial inference is marred by data gaps and a limited view of what constitutes being part of a First Nation.

How Do You Measure Belonging?

Holding status under Section 6 of the Indian Act is the most regulated and formally measured way of understanding First Nations demographics today. While the shortcomings of this approach could fill an article of their own, suffice it to say that the rigid colonial criteria within Section 6 leads to an underestimation of First Nations populations. Furthermore, for the at least 350 Section 11 First Nations whose Membership lists are tied directly to the Indian Register (Statistics Canada, 2021), this underestimation poses an existential threat. The second-generation cut-off written into Section 6 creates a clear avenue for the loss of status between generations unless both parents hold Indian Status. I am not the first author to suggest that this system was intentionally designed to reduce the size of the status First Nations population in Canada over time (Day, 2018). Despite the fact that Indigenous populations have reliably grown faster than non-Indigenous populations over multiple decades, many Section 11 First Nations see the writing on the wall that their Membership could reach zero before you, reader, pass away.

At the end of 2025, the Senate Standing

Committee on Indigenous Peoples voted to amend Bill S-2 so a single parent with Indigenous status under the Indian Act is sufficient to pass status to a child. At the time of writing, the bill is currently on second reading in the house with some uncertainty as to whether or not it will be enacted (Pugliese, 2025). Either way, this is an important plot point in the long novel of how Indigenous identities in Canada have been policed and, importantly for us today, measured.

Another way of understanding First Nations' population is through Membership. For the approximately 230 First Nations that have written Membership codes in accordance with Section 10 of the Indian Act (a.k.a. Section 10 First Nations), Membership does not necessarily correlate with only those who have Indian Status. While Membership codes are unique, they cannot make ineligible those who could otherwise be Members under the Indian Act (1985, s.10). Therefore, changes in Membership rules by Section 10 First Nations can only increase the scope of who is eligible to be a Member. Well maintained Membership lists for Section 10 First Nations are a good source of population data that more closely reflects the true number of community members in a First Nation than the Indian Register.

Why Population Matters

First Nations communities are diverse. I have been fortunate enough to be welcomed into numerous communities through my planning work, and whether it's non-status children, non-Indigenous spouses, or Members who choose not to join the Indian Register, there are many community members who are not captured in most demographic profiles. The effect? Since federal funding is crucial to the operating budgets of many First Nations today, and a wide array of funds are distributed on the basis of Member population (FRE, 2018, Table 1), communities can be left without adequate resources to provide for the actual people they serve.

Take for example, a vaccine funding program based on total Membership. A parent visits their First Nation's health centre to

vaccinate their two children, only one of whom holds status under the Indian Act. For Section 11 First Nations, the second child hasn't been accounted for in the funding arrangement yet anecdotally I can tell you they will get vaccinated anyways. For Section 10 First Nations with Membership codes that have eliminated the second-generation cut-off, no such trade off is necessary. However, the next child that visits may be technically registered to a neighbouring First Nation despite growing up in the community. That child is now in a similar situation where they need, and will likely receive, medication but without contributing to the funding formula. Extrapolated over dozens of health programs, social services, and government initiatives, you can begin to see why both status and Membership are inadequate measures of a real community. *See Figure 1.*

During population projection, these discrepancies are magnified mathematically and can result in both predictions that are too high and too low. The most common and basic method – a linear projection based on compound annual growth rates – does not account for loss of status and is only as good as the data used to inform it. Because of this, Section 11 First Nations often receive reports and plans based on projections that ignore status loss, therefore overestimating future Member population, whereas Section 10 First Nations without accurate Membership data receive documents based on the Indian Register that underestimate the size of their Membership. Either way, this is an issue for planning – making land use decisions for a future population that won't live on reserve, is just an inefficient as mistakenly building a new school half the size as it will need to be.

Proposed Changes

Considering the potential damage that plans based on linear projections using publicly available population data can cause, I propose that it would be more responsible to not perform them in this way at all. In situations where there is sufficient time, money, expertise, data, and understanding of the local

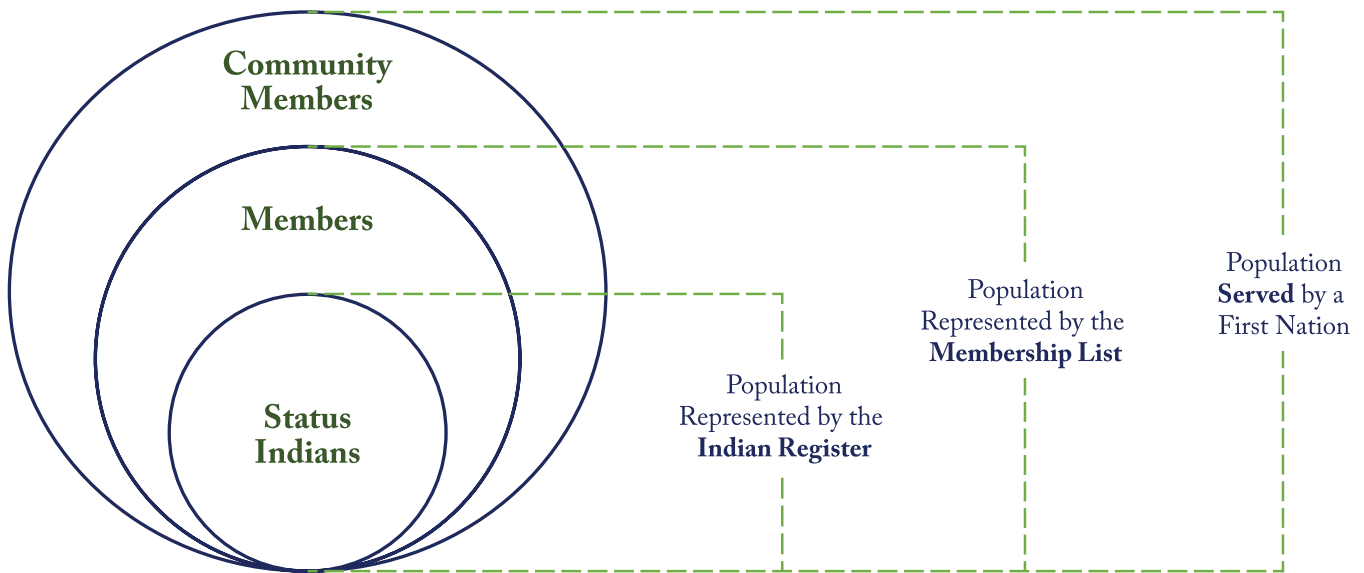


Figure 1:
**Three Different
 Understandings of Section 10
 First Nations Population**

community, more sophisticated population projections are a valuable tool for all types of planning. Too often, however, they are performed as a perfunctory part of report writing by people who do not necessarily have the tools and information to do them accurately. When this occurs and then informs decision-making, it can be a detriment to the First Nation as a whole.

Finally, I would like to take a moment to speak directly to any staff, leaders, or administrators for First Nations who may be reading. There is power in having independent records of your population. Stewarding your own data allows you to determine who is part of your community whether you have an independent membership code or not. It recognizes the child who will always be welcome at the health centre, it gives you the ability

to control who accesses the most accurate records for your First Nation, and it supports the ongoing national conversation we find ourselves in about who is Indigenous and why we're counting.

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