Ethnicity through the family lens: Characteristics of household structures among Canada's ethnic groups in 1901

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ABSTRACT

The settlement of Western Canada at the close of the 19th century gave rise to three overlapping population movements: the regional displacement of Indigenous peoples through treaty processes; the westward migration of Canadian-born settlers from Eastern Canada; and the arrival of European immigrants drawn first by gold prospecting and later by agricultural opportunities. These demographic shifts profoundly reshaped household and family structures—though the full extent of this transformation remains unclear due to historical data limitations. This paper seeks to address that gap by leveraging the newly released full-count data from the 1901 census. Our central research question asks: how did household and family structures vary by ethnic group in Western versus Eastern Canada in 1901? The findings reflect the uneven tempo of immigration and Indigenous displacement across regions, offering new insights into the historical roots of well-documented ethnic differences in contemporary family dynamics (Smock and Schwartz, 2020).

INTRODUCTION

Canada's population history is inextricably linked with that of its ethnic groups, that is, the Indigenous peoples who first inhabited its territory and the European immigrants who colonized it. Nonetheless, "the fact that Canada's aboriginal peoples preceded the arrival of the Europeans by thousands of years is lost in the saga of French and British settlement. Yet from the 1500s, aboriginal-non-aboriginal relations have been important in how Canada has developed politically and economically." Boyd (2015: 36) This is particularly true in Western Canada, which was largely unexplored and not populated until it was settled almost three centuries after the arrivals of the Europeans on the country' eastern seaboard.

Settling the Canadian West created three concurrent population flows: flows of Indigenous peoples being regionally relocated from their native land through treaty-making; and flows of Canadian-born immigrants from Eastern Canada and international European immigrants coming in search for gold and, later, farming opportunities. These flows reconfigured household and family structures to an extent that remains unknown to date because of the lack of appropriate data. In this paper, we begin filling this gap by taking advantage of the newly-released 100% count for the 1901 census. Our main research question is: what are the differences in household and family structures by ethnic group in Western Canada vis-à-vis Eastern Canada in 1901? Our results reflect the pace of immigration and Indigenous displacement across Canada, which helps improving our understanding of well-documented differences in family dynamics by ethnic origin in contemporary societies (Smock and Schwartz, 2020).

BACKGROUND

Brief history of colonization in Western Canada

French and British colonization of what are now Quebec and Ontario can be traced back to the 16th century. On the contrary, colonization of Western Canada followed a different path than on its eastern seaboard, and European settlements were established there only in the 19th century. Until then, beyond Ontario's Western border laid the vast territory of Rupert's land, an essentially private continental estate of almost 4 million km^2 controlled by the Hudson Bay's Company (HBC). The Ojibway, Cree and Sioux were the main Indigenous peoples known to inhabit the region (Morris, 1880: 9). European settlement in the small area around today's Winnipeg begun in 1811, when the Scottish Earl of Selkirk acquired property rights over 300,000 km^2 from the HBC with the stipulation "within ten years, to settle within the tract one thousand families" (Morris, 1880: 10).

Selkirk's settlement would become known as the Red River Colony (or Assiniboia), and it remained the only non-native (albeit increasingly Métis) settlement on the Northwest Prairies for most of the 19th century. Following a treaty between the Earl of Selkirk and five Indian chiefs in 1817, the Red River Colony indeed quickly expanded from a total population of 2,390 in 1831 to 6,691 in 1856 (Statistics Canada, 2000).[1] Due to intermarriage, during this period a growing proportion of families living in the Colony had an Indigenous head of household ("native or half-breed") according to censuses taken by the Council of Assiniboia (Statistics Canada, 2000). The

[1] The Selkirk treaty marks the beginning of a long era of treaty-making between Indigenous peoples and first the British Crown, and then Canada. Overall, 25 treaties were signed between 1811 and 1921, covering the whole Canadian territory from Ontario's Western border to the Atlantic coast.

long history of the settlement's mostly Métis population culminated in the Red River rebellion of 1885.

Beyond Red River Colony, in 1849, the British Crown gave proprietary rights to the HBC over Vancouver Island to promote colonization during the following decade and, between 1850 and 1854, HBC Chief Factor James Douglas (who became the colony's governor in 1851) signed 14 treaties with the Indigenous peoples living around Fort Victoria to acquire rights for settling the land. However, the high cost to purchase the land from the HBC and travelling to the colony proved a deterrent, and the population of Fort Victoria never exceeded few hundreds until 1857, when massive immigration begun "almost overnight" due to the discovery of gold in the Thomson River. Nonetheless, when the Colony of British Columbia joined the Dominion in 1871 "it was so remote from the rest of Canada that mail going east had to carry an American stamp and go through San Francisco" (Dunn and West, 2011). The 1870 census of British Columbia, held in preparation for entering the Dominion, counted a population of close to 12,000, slightly larger than that enumerated in the census of Manitoba carried out the same year (about 10,000).

Western Canada received its largest wave of immigration between 1901 and 1910, as Alberta and Saskatchewan were carved out of the Northwestern Territories. The first decade of the 20th century was marked by 2.8% rate of immigration, "one of the most pronounced episodes experienced by any nation in recorded world history" (McInnis, 2000: 534). These new immigrants helped to populate the new western provinces, and by 1921, more than 25% of Canada's population was living in British Columbia and the Prairie provinces (McInnis, 2000: 539).

The unexplored demographic history of households and families by ethnic origin

The origins of family demography can be traced back to the studies carried out in the 1950s around the question of the historical appearance and distribution of specific family *structures*, notably nuclear vis-à-vis extended or complex households. Early debates centering on the response of household structure to industrialization and urbanization (see, for instance: Goode, 1963), the durability of nuclear household formations (Laslett, 1965, 1972, 1983; Hareven, 1994) and the predominance of neolocal household formation (Hajnal, 1982; Reher, 1998; Hartman, 2004; Thornton, 2005) gave way to long-term analyses which interpret household structure in the light of demographic and economic opportunities to form particular households. By taking advantage of U.S. historical census microdata, over the past twenty-five years Steven Ruggles has empirically tested the predictions of social theory and thus gained important insights in the secular transformation of family structures in North America and other Western societies (Ruggles, 1994; 2003; 2007; 2009; 2015). Ruggles' research shows that the nuclear family was already the predominant living arrangement in the U.S. at the turn of the century owing to high mortality and fertility levels which reduced the 'demographic opportunity' for residing in multigenerational families through the limited availability of elderly kin.

Analyses of the Canadian census samples for 1901 and 1911 seem to show a similar decline in co-residence (Wargon, 1979; Burke, 2007; Darroch, 2014), particularly intergenerational co-residence of elderly women (Dillon, 2014). Yet, our work on the 1901 census of Manitoba suggests that these trends may be biased because census samples overrepresent large households and their complex living arrangements (Trudeau-Laurin et al., 2023). In addition, existing studies cannot fully account for ethnicity because census samples are not representative of specific

ethnic groups and Indigenous peoples. These limitations have key implications for understanding household and family dynamics in Western Canada in the late 19th and early 20th century.

Before contact with the Europeans, there were multiple patterns of Indigenous family and kinship relations in North America (Jenness, 1977: 154-158). At the same time, by the late 19th century, the European family model of the nuclear family "had emerged as a means to stabilize labour force patterns and social relationships based on high economic productivity and mass consumption of commodified good and services" (Gaffield, 1990, cited in Wotherspoon and Satzewich, 2000: 83). As a result, "the process of settlement and land cultivation [in Western Canada] involved the assumption, sometimes stated explicitly, that the nuclear family system composed of a legitimately married male and female and their direct offspring, would prevail.

The treaties signed after the mid-19th century made reference to families as the basis for the allocation of land and annuity payments, with the post-confederation treaties specifying five family members as the norm (Morris, 1880: 287). Indeed, local censuses carried out between 1831 and 1856 for the colony of Assiniboia (Red River) indicate that the proportion of families without a married couple at their core did not exceed 20% (Statistics Canada, 2000). The historical documentation accompanying the data highlights how family co-residence patterns varied over time varied with the colony's fertility levels, and also economic development and labour migration (Statistics Canada, 2000).

Beyond the pre-Confederation, local censuses cited above, the main historical source of nationally-representative information on ethnicity and household relationships is the federal

census. Western Canadian provinces were not included in the first census of the Dominion taken in 1871. In 1881, racial/tribal origin was recorded, but not household relationships. The opposite is true for the census of 1891, where no specific ethnicity question was asked except for a single question to identify French Canadians. The first national census to collect data on both ethnicity and household relationships was thus taken in 1901.

The Canadian Peoples (TCP) project has recently made available, for the first time, individual-level records for all enumerated residents of Canada in the 1901 and 1911 censuses. These data create the unique opportunity to study household and family structures and their evolution at the beginning of the 20th century in Western Canada, when it was receiving a "tsunami of immigrants" and more than half a century of assimilation policies implemented by the British Crown were taken over by the newly established Canadian government.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Our project leverages the resources of the CFI-funded project *The Canadian Peoples* (TCP; thecanadianpeoples.com), of which Inwood is the Principal Investigator. TCP has recently made available cleaned, coded and documented datasets which include 100% of individual records for Canadians enumerated from 1852 to 1921. The 1901 has been chosen for the analysis because it is the first census of all provinces to have recorded information on dwelling and households, including the relationship to the head of the household.[2]

[2] This was not the case for the first Canadian census that included all provinces, carried out in 1881.

In 1901, enumerators were instructed to measure racial origin of "Indian, Eskimo, Negro, Chinese, Japanese and East Indian" by using the criteria of "colour" (Urquhart and Buckley, 1965: 6).[3] While the paternal line continued to be the determining factor for the transmission of identity for Euro-Canadians, an additional instruction in the 1901 census stipulated that "the children begotten of marriages between whites and any one of the other races will be classed as red, black or yellow" and, from 1911 to 1921, the Indigenous origin was to be traced via the mother. These instructions "brushed aside classifications that signified Métis distinctiveness as a people in favour of a racialized 'Indian-or-white' dichotomy." (Andersen, 2008; 354-355).

In contrast with existing census samples, the use of complete-count microdata enable us to view the full range of enumerator-to-respondent interactions inscribed across different census questions, notably the relationship to the head of the household and ethnic origin. The complete-count data also enable us to situate families in their neighborhood context by identifying, via ethnicity and surnames, the network of families enumerated on the same and adjoining pages. Since we use census data, in our project family structure is studied through the lens of households' living arrangements but, because the 1901 census enumerated dwellings and households, we can capture households' co-residence and their ties.

To draw a portrait of family structures by ethnic origin, we apply an innovative methodology that does not impose any *a priori* classification, and thus captures the diversity of households' living arrangements (Bignami et al., 2023). By applying this methodology, individuals' relationship to the household head are used to identify <u>all</u> living arrangements found in the population and to

[3] In the 1901 census, the concept of 'racial or tribal origin' replaced a more general question on ancestral ethnic origin that had been employed from 1852 to 1881. 'Tribal' was eventually dropped starting in the 1931 census (Green, 2014).

best distinguish households by the presence of blood relatives. We present these results distinguishing the following six types of living arrangements, which result to be the ones with the highest statistical frequency in the population: lone nuclear (couple living with children and no one else); lone couple (couple living with no one else); lone single parent (single parent living with children and no one else); lone person (individual living alone); multigenerational (two or more individuals related by blood – siblings or parents/children – living with no one who is not related); other (two or more individuals living together whether related or not, which can include a nuclear family living with boarders, for instance).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Our results show the ethnic divide separating households in Canada's Western periphery from the settled regions of Québec and Ontario (Table 1). In British Columbia, where massive immigration had just begun by the time the census was taken in 1901, 60% and 8% of households had, respectively, a foreign-born and Indigenous head. In Manitoba, 4% of households had an Indigenous head, the corresponding percentage for households with a foreign-born head being 46%. In Québec, only 8% and 1% of households had, respectively, a foreign-born and Indigenous head; in Ontario, the corresponding percentages are 28% and 1%. The largest households are those headed by not Indigenous, not foreign-born in Québec (5.4 persons per household), in line with historical research showing higher fertility among the Catholic, French-speaking population (Gossage and Gavreau, 2007). Almost equally large are Indigenous households found in Manitoba (5.2 persons per household); and Indigenous households are

larger than foreign-born and non-Indigenous headed households in British Columbia as well, whereas the reverse is true in Québec and Ontario.

Table 1. Percentage of households and average household size by the ethnic origin of the head: Manitoba, British Columbia, Québec and Ontario, 1901 census

	Percent of households			Average household size			
	Foreign-born	Indigenous	Not Indigenous, not foreign-born	Foreign-born	Indigenous	Not Indigenous, not foreign-born	*Number of households*
British Columbia	59	8	32	4.3	4.4	4.3	*34767*
Manitoba	46	4	50	4.9	5.2	4.9	*49770*
Ontario	28	1	70	4.6	4.3	4.8	*444961*
Québec	8	1	91	4.9	4.7	5.4	*289709*

These striking regional comparisons reflect the pace of immigration and Indigenous displacement across Canada. Drawing a portrait of households' living arrangements across Canada is insightful not only to better understand differentials in household composition by ethnic group, but also to interpret the statistics presented in Table 1. Table 2 thus presents the distribution of households' living arrangements by the ethnic origin of the head.

Table 2. Percentage of households by living arrangement and the ethnic origin of the head: Manitoba, British Columbia, Québec and Ontario, 1901 census

	Foreign-born	Indigenous	Not Indigenous, not foreign-born	Total
		BRITISH COLUMBIA		
Number of households	*20656*	*2856*	*11255*	*34767*
Lone nuclear	28.8	41.3	33.1	31.2
Lone couple	8.5	17.7	8.9	9.4
Lone single parent	4.1	5.3	3.7	4.1
Lone person	17.3	7.9	14.6	15.7
Multigenerational	7.8	20.9	11.0	9.9
Other	31.9	5.3	27.5	28.3
		MANITOBA		
Number of households	*22714*	*2167*	*24889*	*49770*
Lone nuclear	47.3	50.3	40.0	43.8
Lone couple	7.7	7.7	6.7	7.2
Lone single parent	4.9	8.9	4.3	4.8
Lone person	9.4	6.4	11.2	10.2
Multigenerational	11.8	18.9	14.1	13.2
Other	18.7	7.2	23.4	20.5
		ONTARIO		
Number of households	*126730*	*5829*	*312402*	*444961*
Lone nuclear	44.4	44.9	47.4	46.5
Lone couple	10.1	11.3	9.2	9.5
Lone single parent	10.8	10.7	6.3	7.6
Lone person	5.3	9.2	3.9	4.4
Multigenerational	15.2	15.5	17.7	17.0
Other	13.2	6.9	14.3	13.9
		QUÉBEC		
Number of households	*23141*	*2143*	*264425*	*289709*
Lone nuclear	44.5	53.1	53.6	52.8
Lone couple	10.8	12.2	10.1	10.2
Lone single parent	7.4	7.0	5.7	5.9
Lone person	3.7	4.2	3.5	3.5
Multigenerational	7.8	20.9	11.0	9.9
Other	17.9	6.7	9.6	10.2

Across provinces, the lone nuclear family emerges as the dominant living arrangement regardless of ethnicity except for British Columbia, where other types of living arrangements (most often including boarders) are the most prevalent. For non-Indigenous peoples, our results are in line with the fact that colonization had revolved around the settlement of nuclear families. Indeed, we find the highest percentage of lone nuclear families and lone couples in Québec, followed by

Ontario, Manitoba, and British Columbia. Surprisingly, however, in Western Canada, the lone nuclear family is the most prevalent when the household head is Indigenous. To what extent is this result biased by how the ethnic origin of the household head was recorded in these historical censuses given their complexity and representational nature as colonial settler instruments? A comparison of our results with those of the 1856 census of Red River Settlement in Manitoba raises questions as to who was counted, and how. Indeed, the 1856 census enumerated 1,094 families, of which 78% were headed by a "native or half-breed" and less than 20% by a "foreign-born" (Statistics Canada, 2000). Our results for the corresponding census subdistrict of Selkirk in the 1901 census show that close to 20% of 5,723 households then had an Indigenous head (the majority, 16.5%, a Métis head). One reason for the discrepancy could be that, although the 1901 census is considered the first complete enumeration of Indigenous peoples, this does not mean that all the Indigenous peoples living in the newly-established Canadian nation in 1901 were enumerated in the census. Mobility is the most important reason for incomplete coverage, especially in the West and in the northern territories. Groups in areas that had not yet been settled were more likely to be nomadic and therefore only estimated as they were difficult to track. Similarly, groups engaged in traditional activities may have been away at the time of the census, as Hamilton (2007) observed in the United States. The extent to which this incomplete or inaccurate coverage may have led to under-enumeration of specific household types remains unknown. In additions, First Nations living in Manitoba and British Columbia in 1901 were small and heterogenous groups. Although their number is small, the Ojibway's households we found in the 1901 census of Manitoba resulted to have the highest percentage of multihouseholds, in line with Shoemaker (1991)'s analysis of the 1901 US census sample for the

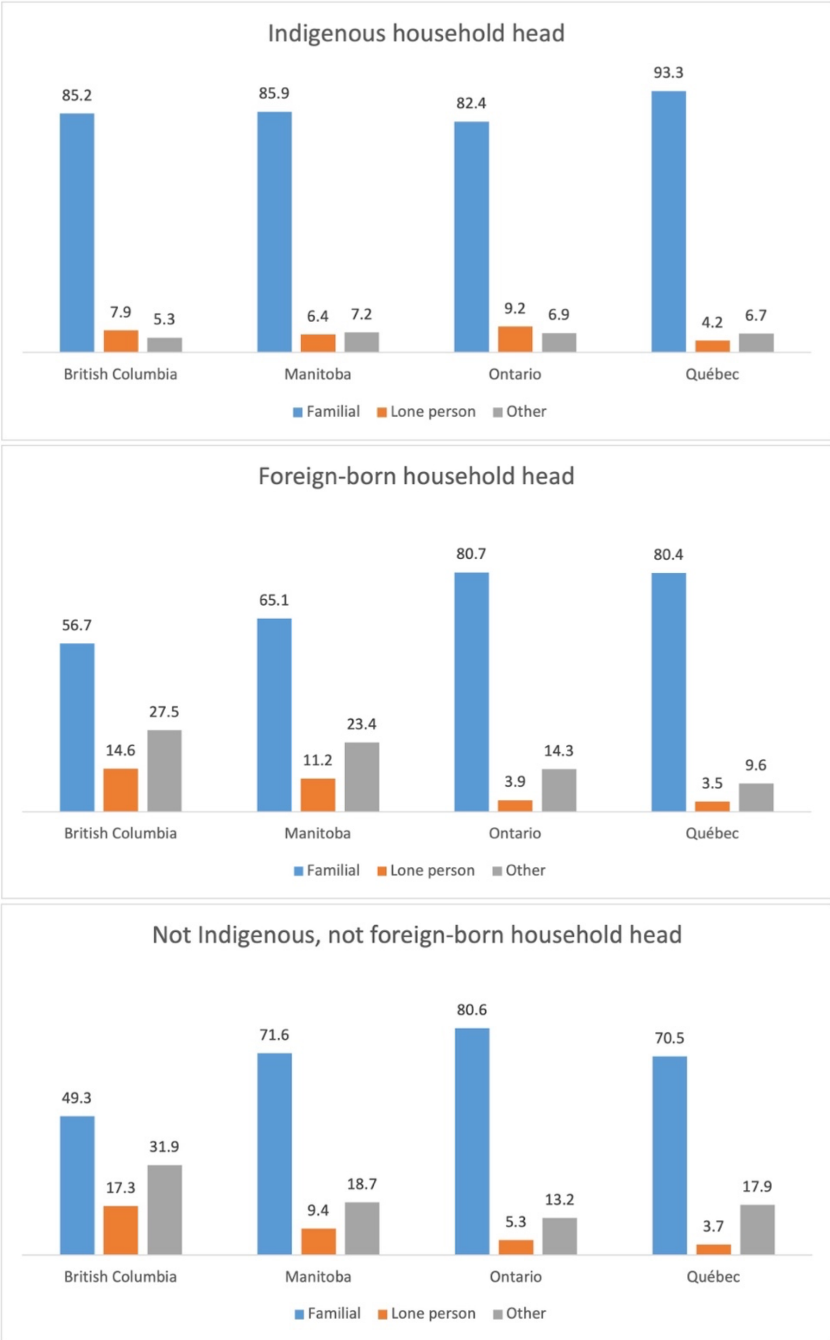
same Indigenous group[4]. Overall, Table 2 shows that, in all provinces, the most prevalent living arrangements with an Indigenous head after nuclear households is multigenerational, whether vertically or laterally extended.

In Western Canada, the lone nuclear family is the least prevalent living arrangement if the head is foreign-born and the lone person is the most prevalent one (Figure 1). In British Columbia, where immigration was most recent, lone person households headed by a foreign-born indeed represent almost a fifth of all households, whereas lone person households are least prevalent in the provinces of established immigration, Québec and Ontario.

This analysis offers a succinct, descriptive overview of the ethnic patterns that characterised Canadian households at the turn of the century. The revealed patterns establish a benchmark for further study and the testing of specific hypotheses.

[4] The three Indigenous groups in Shoemaker's analysis are the Seneca, Yakima and Ojibway. The Ojibway, Cree and Sioux were the main Indigenous peoples known to inhabit the region of today's Manitoba in the early 19th century (Morris, 1880: 9).

Figure 1. Percentage of households with familial living arrangements, with lone person, and with other living arrangements by the ethnic origin of the head: Manitoba, British Columbia, Québec and Ontario, 1901 census



CONCLUSION

Differences in family structure and dynamics by ethnic origin are well-documented in contemporary societies (Smock and Schwartz, 2020). Historical data can help us understand how these differences arose, since the household is the central historical site of the mediation between individual experiences and structural change (Darroch, 2014). It is through their household and family experiences that people make sense of and respond to changes in the larger socio-economic and political formations that surround them.

How do the TCP 1901 census data help us understand differentials by ethnic origin in households' living arrangements at the beginning of the 20th century in Western Canada? Regional comparisons of the proportion of households headed by foreign-born, Indigenous or other Canadian born between Québec, Ontario, Manitoba and British Columbia reflect the pace of immigration and Indigenous displacement across Canada at the turn of the century. The portrait of living arrangements by the ethnic origin of the household head raises questions about how Indigenous peoples were counted, which are not new. It is well-established that the study of household and families via historical censuses poses problems of definition. Enumerators who encountered polygamous households, matrilocal female-headed families, the presence of half siblings or a mix of kin and non-kin or distinct dwelling structures may or may not have inscribed these features in the preconceived format of the census. The vocabulary used by particular tribes to describe family relationships may not have translated well to census English or French, kin and non-kin residents may have been conflated, honour relationships and

customary adoptions left unrecognized, and seasonal variations may have gone unobserved (Shoemaker 1991: 331; Shoemaker 1992: 7; Hamilton, 2007: 74-75).

These issues of definition were compounded by the state's overarching approach to the census enumeration at the beginning of the 20th century. By then, the census was established as a crucial practice of governing the state (Anderson, 2008: 356-357). As Kahnawà:ke Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson observes, "[t]he desire for land produces 'the problem' of Indigenous life that is already living on that land" (2014: 19). To reckon with this problem, the census served as inventory of Indigenous presence in the West, intended to be used to as an instrument of erasure and assimilation of Indigenous peoples and their families (Tascherau Mamers, 2017). Although, as colonizer and colonized, their positions in the newly-established Canadian nation were fundamentally different, the state had the same approach in regard to immigrants and Indigenous peoples, who had to be "absorbed and unified." Even in modern Western census there is a tendency to identify first the nuclear family and then define the rest of the members of the household by their relationship to this nuclear family, which might not reflect the real social dynamic of the household (Bignami-Van Assche et Simard 2020; Hertrich et al. 2020). One might expect that this was even more so at the beginning of the twentieth century, when enumerators were not familiar with non-Western household living arrangements. Indeed this could be difficult to do for dwellings that did not correspond to the enumeration definition, and the Indigenous kinship systems did not necessarily fit with the kin relations expected by the census (Canadian Families Project 2002). This has been observed in modern censuses and survey as well. In a study on remote Indigenous households in contemporary Australia, Morphy (2006) observed that while the census recognized the fact that a dwelling could count more than one

household, it did not acknowledged the fact one household could be spread through more than one dwelling. Hertrich (2020) also finds that in censuses conducted in Mali that were centered on nuclear families, individuals who were not tied to any nuclear families were more likely to not be counted. The lack of trust was also a problem, as Indigenous peoples may have worried that the. information given to the enumerator would be used against them. Indigenous families may have specifically minimized the reporting of children to the DIA representatives, who often administered the census instead of enumerators, and who were also responsible for the removal of children to residential schools (Hamilton, 2007). The lack of trust could also come from, or be amplified by the language barrier, that made it difficult for the chief to understand the purpose of the census (Hamilton, 2007). In light of these considerations, the results presented in this paper make a contribution to begin better understanding historical censuses as colonial settler instruments.

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