

Canadian census sees cities surging

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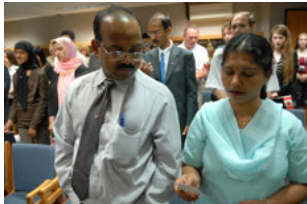
Canadians are officially city folk, with four out of five people living in urban centres.

The first data from the 2006 Census puts Canada's national population at 31.6 million, a rise of 5.4 per cent since the 2001 census.

And most people are living in a metropolis.

Six metropolitan areas now claim more than a million residents. Calgary and Edmonton joined Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver and Ottawa-Gatineau in the "millionaire's club", which now houses 45 per cent of the Canadians.

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Malla Reddy Choodi, left, and Padma Choodim, right, sing the national anthem during a Toronto citizenship ceremony where they become new Canadians in this June, 2006 file photo. (Fernando Morales/The Globe and Mail)




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Barrie, north of Toronto, was the fastest growing census metropolitan area, notching up a 19.2 per cent population rise to 177,061 for the census region, and a 24 per cent rise for the city itself.

It joins five other metropolitan areas on the densely populated shores of the Great Lakes — known as the Greater Golden Horseshoe — on the list of fastest growing metro areas: Oshawa, Toronto, Kitchener, Guelph and Brantford are all in the nation's top 15.

The figures are no surprise to Barrie Mayor Dave Aspden. Listed as a growth area for decades, the city's main challenge is finding room for the new people arriving year after year. "We're running out of room," Mr. Aspden says.

"We grow approximately the size of Orillia every five years," he said. "Barrie needs support, not only in land but funding as well."

International immigration has played a large role in Barrie's expansion, and indeed is the key to the nation's rising headcount.

Without immigration, the national story would be much less buoyant, says Doug Norris, formerly a Statscan official and now chief demographer at Environics Analytics.

"Births are pretty much matching up with deaths. It's clear that the number of immigrants will drive the growth. For the most part, this is an immigration story," Mr. Norris said after the census release on Tuesday.

"It will get more interesting when we drill down into different communities."

Statistics Canada says 1.2 million immigrants have arrived since 2001, and if current trends continue, net immigration may become the only source of population growth by about 2030.

Alberta and Ontario accounted for two-thirds of the population increase, while the North West Territories, Alberta and Nunavut recorded the highest percentage population rises.

Alberta's population rose 10.6 per cent in five years to reach 3.2 million. Nunavut's population rose 10.2 per cent to 29,474 and the Territories increased 11 per cent to 41,464 from 37,360, although Statistics Canada said the result may be tainted by a less accurate 2001 count.

Eight mid-size urban centres had a growth rate of more than 10 per cent, about twice as high as the rate for Canada as a whole. Seven of the eight were in Alberta.

Eastern provinces paid the highest price for the internal migration, but the exodus is slowing. While Newfoundland and Labrador's population dropped 1.5 per cent from 2001 to 2006, that is a vast change from the 7-per-cent drop it experienced in the five years previous to this census period.

Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick all recorded population growth under 1 per cent between 2001 and 2006.

And it seems sitting next door to the nation's hottest economy has few residual benefits when it comes to attracting residents: Saskatchewan's population dropped 1.1 per cent to 968,157.

This is the first time since 1991 that the census-to-census growth rate has accelerated.

The population figures identify growth rates and trends over the past five years, influencing a swathe of areas from federal transfer payments and political representation to bus schedules.

The census cost \$567-million to conduct. It was the first to allow Canadians to complete the questionnaire online, an option taken up by 18.5 per cent of households, and allowed Canadians to keep their personal information under wraps beyond the traditional release period of 92 years.

The total response rate of about 97 per cent is similar to 2001 levels. Statscan estimates information for the remaining 3 per cent of Canadians.

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