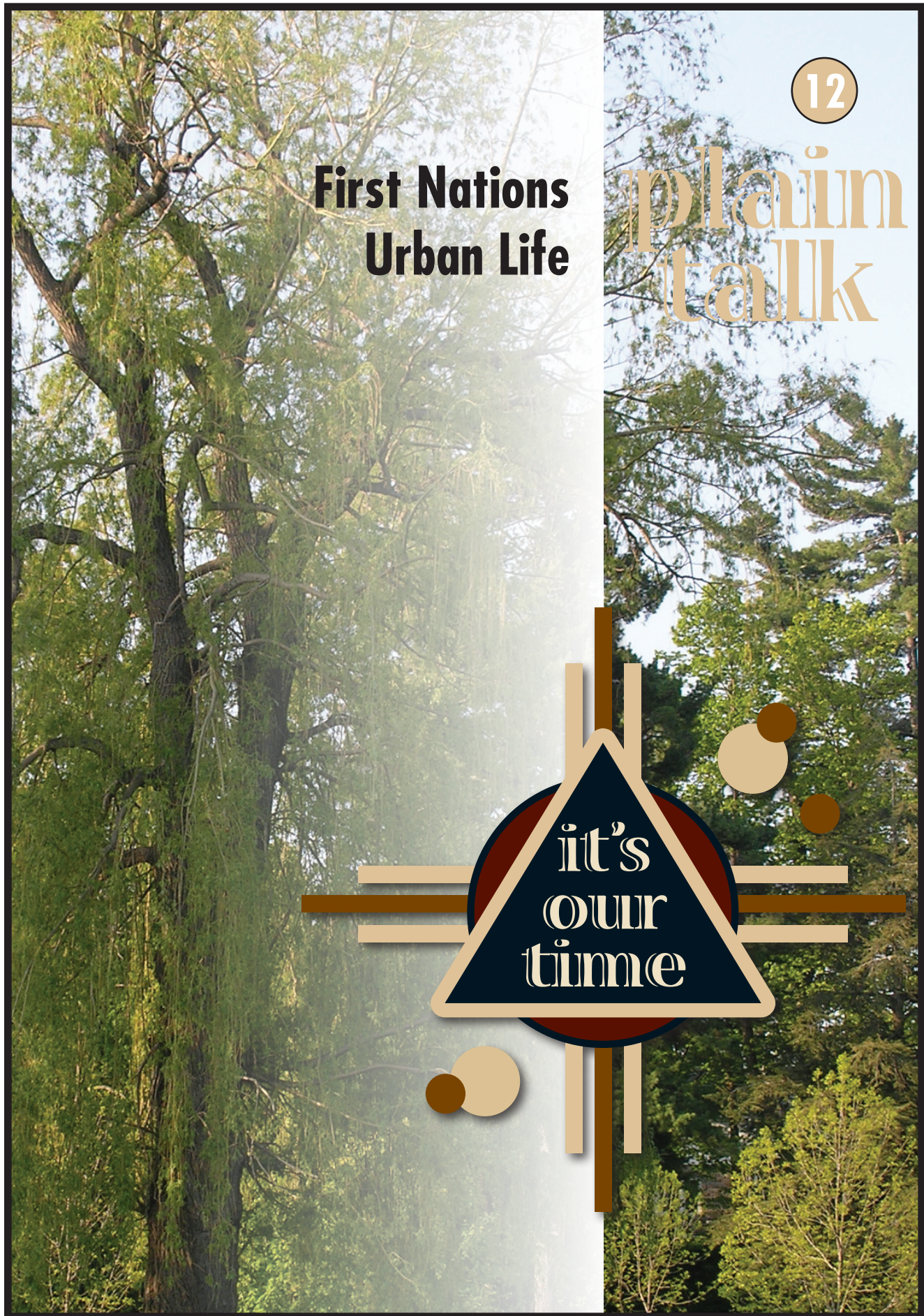


12

**First Nations
Urban Life**

plain
talk

it's
our
time



The term “First Nations” refers to one of three groups of Indigenous peoples recognized in the Canadian Constitution Act of 1982. First Nations are a diverse group of about 80 Nations in over 633 communities speaking languages that encompass over 50 distinct linguistic clusters. According to the Assembly of First Nations, in 2006 approximately forty percent of First Nations citizens lived off-reserve in urban settings. The Census indicates that the urban population of First Nations peoples may have risen slightly since then.

This Plain Talk attempts to provide a portrait of the First Nations urban experience. However, presenting a clear picture of First Nations urban dwellers is difficult because of ambiguities in the data collected:

1. In relevant research and reports of First Nations peoples, the term off-reserve is not used consistently and uniformly. For example, some studies consider urban to be synonymous with off-reserve, but the terms are not interchangeable. As a result reports and studies can make erroneous conclusions. In some studies, an “off-reserve” category has included First Nations people living in rural areas that are not strictly urban.
2. Data and statistics based exclusively on urban First Nations populations are sparse. Furthermore, research and reporting methods have defined “First Nations” in different ways. In many cases, data have been drawn from a broad sample of Indigenous or “Aboriginal” people that included Inuit, and Métis as well as First Nations members.
3. Among First Nations peoples, there has traditionally been considerable movement between cities and reserves, as well as between cities and within cities, so that definitive conclusions about off- versus on-reserve residence can be difficult.
4. A rise in the urban population has been reported, but migration may not have been responsible. Rather, it's likely that a number of First Nations members who has always lived in urban centres gained official recognition or self-identified for the first time. Also, it seems likely that Statistics Canada undercounted members living in First Nations communities because of incomplete enumeration.
5. Data may be biased because of regional differences. The vast majority of data about urban First Nations people is based on research performed in Western Canada and Ontario locations and collected from a diverse Aboriginal group including First Nations people.



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6. Data may also be biased because of the type of survey employed. In some studies, the information may not be representative because people included in the survey had the choice of responding only to some of the questions in the survey.
7. It has also been suggested that government and bureaucratic practices have driven underestimates of First Nations populations in order to limit First Nations' rights and access to resources and lands.

Both Indigenous and other researchers have proposed a number of factors that drive movement by First Nations people to urban settings:

1. Desire for better housing and overall living conditions;
2. Search for better educational and employment opportunities;
3. Escape from violence for some women;
4. Access to medical and health specialists;
5. A cultural connection to urban areas because many Canadian cities were established in areas that were historical First Nations settlements and gathering places.

The urban experience of First Nations members is complex, and the available data are not entirely reliable:

1. Characteristically, there is fluidity of movement between urban areas and reserves, because strong ties, connections and relationships are often maintained with home communities.
2. Many First Nations members spend considerable time and effort building culture and community and strengthening cultural identities in their urban areas through a range of activities like involvement in Friendship Centres, which play a key role because they're often the first point of contact for First Nations members moving into cities, and provide a wide array of culturally appropriate services to Indigenous people living in urban areas.

3. Many First Nations members who live in urban areas or settlement lands continue to be active in the political lives of their home communities. They vote in band elections and even run for office in their communities.
4. Some data indicate that many First Nations urban residents consider returning to their home communities at some time in the future, indicating that culture, identity and links to community remain strong among urban residents.
5. To a large extent, First Nations urban experience in large cities is more characteristic of Western Canada than Eastern Canada. There are large First Nations populations in Vancouver, Edmonton, Saskatoon and Winnipeg.
6. Urban Indigenous residents are more likely to live in poor income neighbourhoods because of persistent poverty, although there is an increasing trend to reside in a wide variety of city neighbourhoods. Data specific to First Nations is not available.
7. Most of First Nations members living off-reserve report that their health is “very good” or “excellent” while less than half of on-reserve members report the same.
8. Comparing off-reserve to on-reserve First Nations people, there is:
 - less diabetes
 - less high-blood pressure
 - more income from employment
 - extremely high risk of sexual exploitation and violence among women
 - slightly more asthma
 - slightly more heart problems
9. Although First Nations members living in urban areas may benefit from more opportunities and greater access to services, they are also likely to encounter racism, poverty, marginalization, and exclusion.
10. Both on-reserve and off-reserve First Nations people are five times more likely than non-Indigenous people to live in crowded homes, a situation that can be associated with a range of health problems, including transmission of infectious diseases, risk of injuries, family tensions, and violence.
11. Twice as many urban First Nations homes as non-Indigenous homes require major repairs; almost half of on-reserve First Nations people live in homes requiring major repairs.

12. Some researchers have concluded that the history of relations between First Nations members and the federal government has profoundly affected the health and social status of all First Nations people, whether urban or on-reserve.

The Assembly of First Nations recognizes that First Nations leadership has a continuing and growing need to serve both members living in their home communities as well as those who live in urban and other areas. Consequently, the Assembly of First Nations and First Nations leadership are working to build an urban strategy to move away from Indian Act restrictions that prevent First Nations citizens living off-reserve and in settlement lands from accessing their treaty rights as well as services.

First Nations need a continuum of services that will spark success no matter where our people reside. By supporting education on-reserve, we can create the conditions that promote successful outcomes when our youth leave to pursue postsecondary education. In addition, we must build strong economies on-reserve to employ those graduates who return home.

References

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it's our time...

*Treat the earth well.
It was not given to you
by your parents,
it was loaned to you
by your children.
Ancient Indian Proverb*

