

Impressions and perceptions of Aboriginal peoples

Importance of Aboriginal peoples to Canada

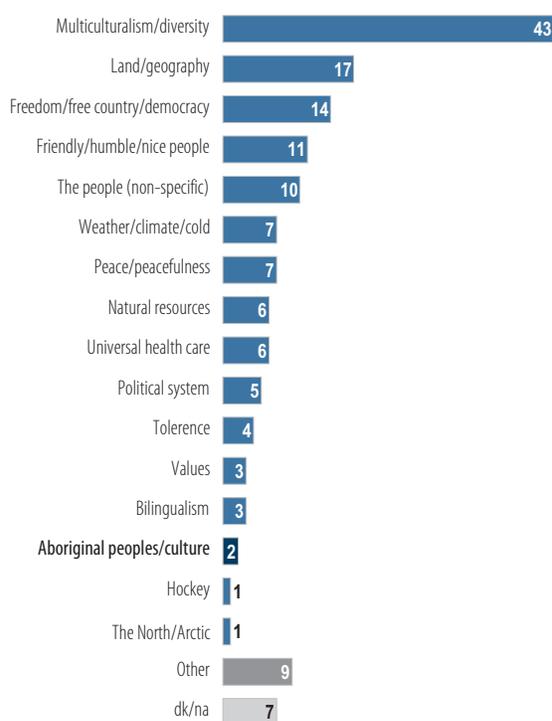
Most Canadians say Aboriginal history and culture are a defining characteristic of what makes the country unique, but it is not what most think of top-of-mind. The public is more likely to emphasize the country's multiculturalism, health care system, and its land and geography.

Non-Aboriginal Canadians perceive a complex web of attributes that make up the country's national identity. When asked, unprompted (without being offered response options), to identify what they think makes Canada unique, Aboriginal peoples and culture is among the responses, but well down the list. Only two percent mention anything related to Aboriginal peoples, indicating it is not top-of-mind as a defining characteristic of the country. This is consistent with results from the 2009 Survey of Non-Aboriginal Canadians which covered the country's 10 largest cities.

What Canadians do define as unique is the country's multiculturalism and diversity, mentioned by over four in ten respondents (43%). Land and geography, the next most common response, is mentioned by 17 percent of Canadians, while smaller numbers refer to the distinctive cold weather/climate (7%), and rich natural resources (6%). For another 14 percent, Canada is unique because of its freedom and democratic system, while universal health care is acknowledged by six percent. For some, what most distinguishes Canada from other countries is Canadians, themselves; one in ten (11%) mentions the "nice," "friendly," "humble" nature of the populace, while another 10 percent refer to "the people" more generically.

While Aboriginal peoples are far from the first thing that comes to mind for most non-Aboriginal Canadians as a defining characteristic of Canada, when prompted directly, more than nine in ten acknowledge Aboriginal history and culture as a very (55%) or somewhat (37%) important characteristics of Canada's identity as a country. Moreover, the importance placed on Aboriginal history and culture has increased 13 percentage points in urban Canada over the

What makes Canada unique?



Q2
What do you think makes Canada unique?

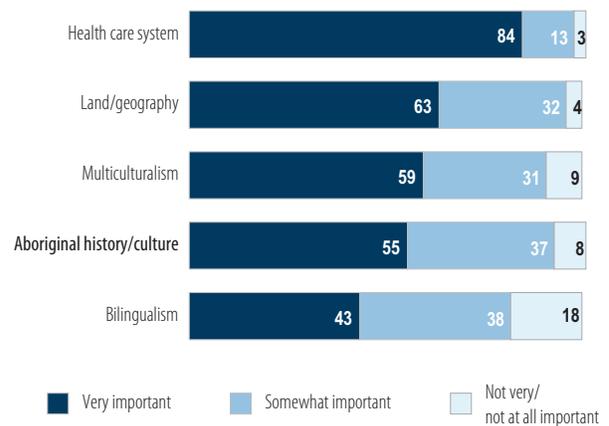
past seven years. In 2009, 45 percent of Canadians living in major urban centres believed Aboriginal history and culture were very important in defining Canada, rising to 58 percent in 2016.

Despite embracing Aboriginal history and culture as an important building block for what defines their country, non-Aboriginal Canadians place greater emphasis on several other defining characteristics presented in the survey, notably the health care system (84% say very important), the land and geography (63%), and multiculturalism (59%). Only bilingualism is given a less prominent role than Aboriginal history and culture in defining Canada, with 43 percent of Canadians calling it very important (a more robust 64% in Quebec).

The importance given to Aboriginal history and culture in defining Canadian identity varies by region, with residents of the Atlantic provinces (63%), Ontario (61%) and B.C. (58%) among the most likely to deem it very important, and those living in Saskatchewan and Quebec least likely to do so (44% each). Among population groups, those most likely to consider Aboriginal history and culture a major aspect of their vision of Canada include immigrants (67% very important vs. 52% of those born in Canada), and women (63% vs. 46% of men).

Finally, awareness of First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities is associated with placing strong importance on their history and culture as a part of what defines Canada. Those who pay a great deal of attention to Aboriginal news and stories, for example, are twice as likely (72%) to say Aboriginal history and culture play a very important role in defining Canada as those who pay little or no attention (35%).

Importance in defining Canada



Q.3

Do you think each of the following is very important, somewhat important, not very important, or not at all important in defining Canada ... Aboriginal history and culture ... Bilingualism ... Multiculturalism ... Land and geography ... The health care system ... ?

General impressions of Aboriginal peoples

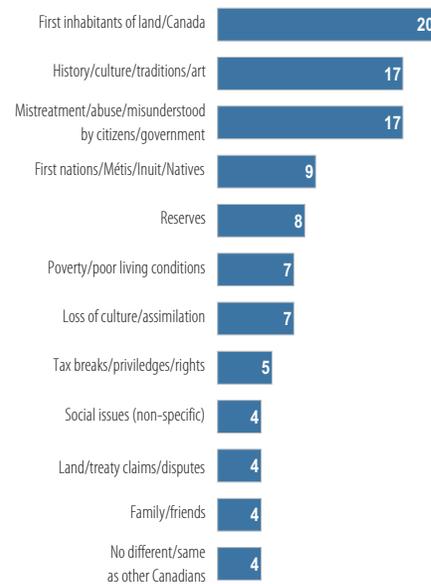
Non-Aboriginal Canadians' top-of-mind impressions of Aboriginal peoples includes a mix of positive and negative attributes. Six in ten say their general impression hasn't changed in recent years, but the balance are more likely to say it has improved than gotten worse.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS. Non-Aboriginal Canadians recognize the importance of Aboriginal history and culture in defining Canada. This includes a full tapestry of images and characteristics of who Aboriginal peoples are and what they mean for Canada. When asked, unprompted, what first comes to mind when they think of Aboriginal peoples in Canada, non-Aboriginal Canadians give a lengthy list of impressions that can be grouped into five broad themes.

- **First inhabitants/specific population group (29%).** The number one top-of-mind response – from 20 percent of Canadians – is that Aboriginal peoples are Canada's first inhabitants. Another one in ten (9%) associates them with various names historically assigned to Aboriginal groups, such as First Nations, Métis, Inuit, Native Canadians and Indians. Aboriginal peoples as Canada's first inhabitants is an image mentioned more frequently by men and by Canadians born outside the country.
- **Negative experiences in Canada (33%).** One in six (17%) recalls a negative legacy of Aboriginal peoples' experiences in Canada, referring to the historic mistreatment and abuse inflicted on Canada's Aboriginal population by the government and other citizens. Similarly, others mention the loss of culture and assimilation associated with institutionalized oppression (7%), land disputes, treaty claims, and protests (4%), their isolation and separation from Canada (3%), and residential schools (2%). Mistreatment of Aboriginal peoples surfaces more readily among older Canadians and university graduates. Canadians living in urban centres are much more likely to have first impressions in this category of negative experiences today than was the case in 2009 (up 17 points, to 35%).
- **Aboriginal history and culture (17%).** One in six non-Aboriginal Canadians (17%) immediately thinks of the rich history and traditions of Aboriginal peoples as reflected by their cultural and artistic practices. Residents of Canada's northern Territories are more likely than others single out

Top-of-mind impressions of Aboriginal peoples

Top mentions



Q.4

What first comes to mind when you think of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada?

this aspect of Aboriginal peoples (31%). The proportion of Canadians living in urban centres who focus on Aboriginal history and culture has increased 10 points since 2009 (from 9% to 19%).

- **Poor living conditions (22%).** A number of Canadians raise issues linked to how Aboriginal peoples live in Canada today. Eight percent mention reserves, others refer to the issue of poverty and poor living conditions often faced by Aboriginal peoples (7%), alcoholism and substance abuse (3%), and social issues generically (4%).
- **Negative views of Aboriginal peoples (13%).** Just over one in ten expresses his or her first impression of Aboriginal peoples in clearly negative terms pertaining to special treatment or negative attributes. This includes mention of tax breaks and other rights and privileges (5%), reliance on welfare or government handouts (3%), that Aboriginal peoples are lazy or don't work to contribute to society (2%), and generally negative feelings (3%). The proportion citing such impressions in urban Canada is essentially unchanged since 2009.

HAVE OVERALL IMPRESSIONS CHANGED? Over the past few years, Aboriginal peoples have often been front and centre in the media and public discourse. Indian residential schools, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the Idle No More movement have all raised the profile of their experiences and living conditions in Canada. Has this activity changed how the non-Aboriginal mainstream in Canada consciously thinks about Aboriginal peoples? For many, there appears to have been little concrete impact; six in ten (61%) say their general impressions have not changed over the past few years. Of the remainder, one in four (26%) says his or her impression is now better, compared with one in ten (10%) who now have a worse impression.

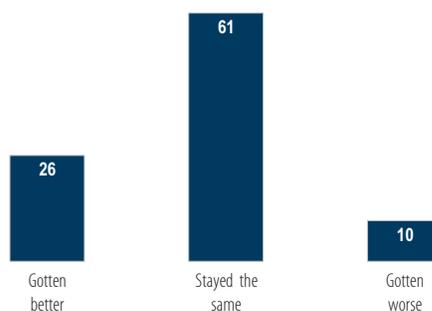
Regionally, Atlantic Canadians (34%) are more likely than those living elsewhere to say their impression has improved, while residents of the Territories are almost three times more likely than the average Canadian to state that their impression has gotten worse (27%). Across population groups, it is older Canadians (60 plus) who are most likely to report an improved view of Aboriginal peoples (33%).

Across the population, non-Aboriginal people born in Canada are twice as likely as immigrants to say their impressions have deteriorated (12% vs. 6%). Knowledge and awareness of Aboriginal peoples is also linked to more favourable impressions: Canadians who report paying attention to, and being aware of, news and stories about Aboriginal peoples are significantly more likely to say their impressions of Aboriginal peoples have improved in recent years, compared with those paying less attention.

Why impressions have improved? When those who say their impressions of Aboriginal peoples have improved in the past few years were asked (unprompted) why this is the case, their responses fall into three broad categories:

- **Increased knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal peoples (64% of this group).** Canadians are most likely to say their impressions have improved because of what they have learned in recent years. This includes those who say they gained a better understanding of, and appreciation for, the history of Aboriginal peoples in Canada, and the legacy of discrimination and abuse they have faced through the residential school system and other institutions (34%). A similar proportion (30%) mentions they have developed a more positive impression through learning about Aboriginal culture and events.

Has your impression of Aboriginal peoples changed?



Q.5
Over the past few years, has your impression of Aboriginal Peoples gotten better, gotten worse, or stayed the same?

- **Increased visibility of Aboriginal peoples (47%).** A sizeable proportion of Canadians in this group say their impressions have improved because of the increased prominence and visibility of Aboriginal peoples in the community and the media (24%), or through perceived advancements in terms of education and economic achievement in Aboriginal communities (23%).
- **Increased contact with Aboriginal peoples (28%).** Some report improved impressions because of friendships or business relationships with Aboriginal peoples (19%), living near a reserve or urban Aboriginal population (7%), or family and friends who work with Aboriginal co-workers (2%).

The link between increased knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal peoples and improved impressions is much stronger in 2016 among urban Canadians than was the case seven years ago: One-third (35%) give this reason today compared to just 13 percent in 2009, close to a three-fold increase. Further, 28 percent of urban Canadians say they have more positive views now due to having learned more about Aboriginal culture and issues, versus 11 percent in 2009.

Why impressions have worsened. Those who report worsening impressions of Aboriginal peoples (10% of the population) give reasons that fall into three categories:

- **Special treatment from government (53%).** The most common response given by this group is the feeling that Aboriginal peoples get special treatment from government, profiting from services and benefits that are not available to other citizens. One in four (26%) in this group believes that Aboriginal peoples abuse privileges and take advantage of laws, while a similar percentage object to them asking for handouts and relying on, rather than contributing to, society (24%). A few have more negative views because they believe Aboriginal issues are over-represented (2%) or that Aboriginal citizens should not be treated differently than other Canadians (1%).
- **Perceived negative behaviours (44%).** Worsening impressions of Aboriginal peoples are also tied to reasons related to negative behaviours attributed to the Aboriginal population, including not taking advantage of opportunities offered to them to improve their lives (13%), alcoholism and substance abuse (11%), criminal activity (8%), militant or violent protests (8%), and refusal to integrate into mainstream society (4%).
- **Negative stereotypes/experience (29%).** Lingering stereotypes and negative portrayal in the media (14%) also contribute to worsening impressions of Aboriginal peoples, while 15 percent say their impressions have changed due to negative personal experiences.

This list of reasons is essentially the same as the one recorded in the 2009 survey in the country's major cities, with somewhat more emphasis given to special treatment and negative stereotypes/experience, and somewhat less given to perceived negative behaviours.

Note: The subsamples for these questions are too small to support analysis by region and population groups.

Are Aboriginal peoples unique or just like other ethnic and cultural groups?

Canadians are divided on whether Aboriginal peoples have unique rights as the first inhabitants of Canada or are just like other cultural or ethnic groups in society. The former view is more firmly held in central and eastern Canada, as well as among women and immigrants.

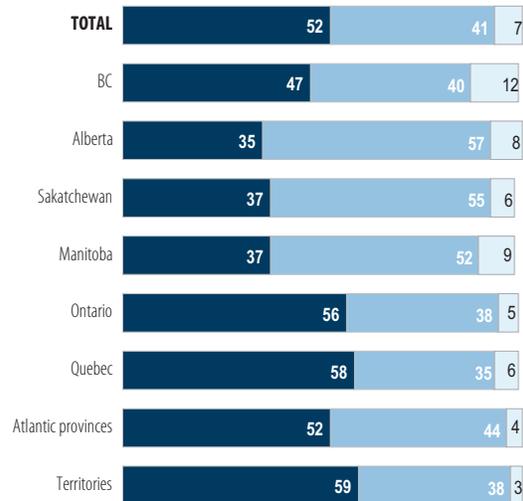
Aboriginal peoples have constitutionally recognized rights in Section 35 of the Constitution Act, as well as in Section 25 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Many non-Aboriginal Canadians recognize Aboriginal peoples as first inhabitants; they acknowledge their unique history and culture; and, when prompted, believe they are an important defining feature of Canada. But does this translate into according them a unique status among Canadians? On this question, the non-Aboriginal public is divided, with little change in views since 2009.

Just over half (52%) of non-Aboriginal Canadians say that Aboriginal peoples have unique rights as the first inhabitants of the continent, compared with 41 percent who believe they are just like other cultural or ethnic groups in Canada's multicultural society. The remainder insist that both statements are true (5%) or that neither is true (2%). Among urban residents, opinions are essentially unchanged from 2009, when 54 percent said Aboriginal peoples have unique rights versus 39 percent who equated them with other ethnic or cultural groups.

This divide in opinions is largely reflected across Canada, although perspectives differ somewhat across the country between Prairie residents and the rest of Canada. Majorities in Alberta (57%), Saskatchewan (55%) and Manitoba (52%) believe that Aboriginal peoples are just like other marginalized groups in Canada, while the opposite view – that they have unique rights – is held more strongly in the Territories (59%), Quebec (58%), Ontario (56%) and the Atlantic provinces (52%).

Opinions are also largely divided across socio-economic and demographic groups, with acknowledgment of Aboriginal peoples as having unique rights is somewhat more evident among women, people born outside of Canada, and those with lower household incomes. There are no differences across age cohorts or level of educational attainment. Moreover, having frequent personal contact with Aboriginal peoples is not linked to greater acknowledgement of their unique status in Canada.

Do Aboriginal peoples have unique rights or are they just like other ethnic/cultural groups?



Q.7

Which of the following two statements best represents how you think about Aboriginal Peoples?