

Commentary

The Mysterious Ways of Aboriginal Statistics in the Yukon: Access to, and Interpretation of, Statistics Canada Data

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Between 2007 and 2011, I served as the Chief Statistician at the Yukon Bureau of Statistics (YBS), a branch of the Yukon government. This allowed me to develop a strong working relationship with senior staff at Statistics Canada, which resulted in the creation of new and improved measures with which to analyze Aboriginal issues in the Yukon and across Canada. This article outlines three challenges that were brought to YBS's attention, by First Nations people, organizations, or governments, regarding the challenges they were facing in managing or understanding data flowing out of Statistics Canada—or, in some cases, how data was not flowing at all.

The first case study reviews Statistics Canada's original official press release for the *2006 Census – Aboriginal Peoples for the Yukon*, a press release that was based on a questionable and outdated understanding of the Yukon's post-land claims geography. The second case study looks at how the Yukon Métis Nation inaccurately interpreted the 2006 Census questions on Aboriginal identity in order to advance their political agenda, while the third case study was brought to YBS attention by a First Nation government that was trying to figure out how many people worked for it. This particular question led us at YBS to request data on Territory-wide First Nations government employment and salary figures from Statistics Canada (StatCan). The result was the first ever release of data from Statistics Canada's Survey of Employment and Payroll Hours (SEPH), which illustrated the considerable impact of First Nations' government employment on the Yukon's economy.

Yukon Indian Reserves—a Bureaucratic Oxymoron

For the most part, the challenges YBS faced revolved around the changing relationship between the Yukon's First Nations—the majority of which have signed final land claim settlements—and the federal government; these challenges included issues of language, terminology, and geography. One example was the surprising and somewhat disturbing press release that came across my desk early one morning from Statistics Canada. StatCan's official press release, *Communique 2006 Census—Aboriginal Peoples*, included the following opening bullet:

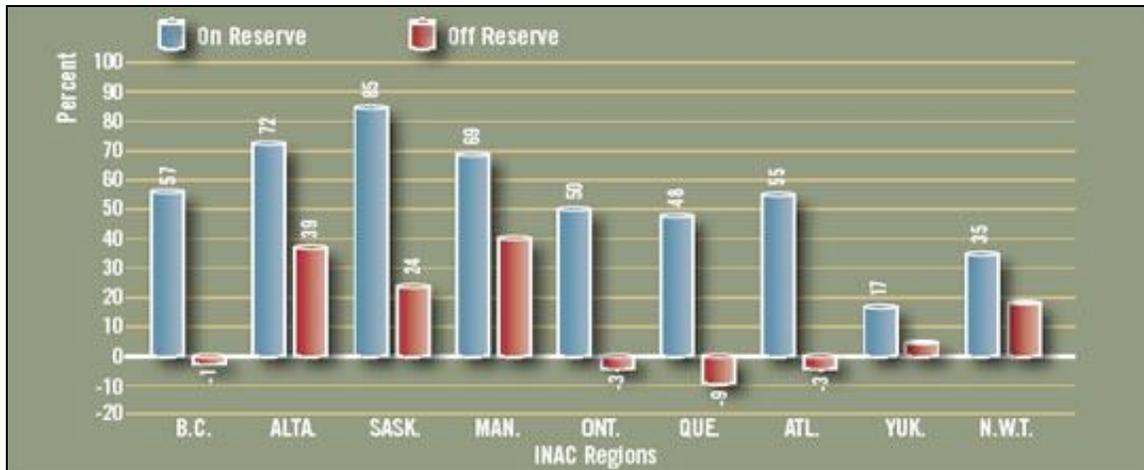
- There are 16 First Nations reserves in Yukon. All participated in the 2006 Census. 30% of First Nations people in Yukon lived on reserve.¹

A number of errors are captured in this simple, three-sentence construct. First, there are fourteen First Nations in the Yukon, of which eleven have signed land claims. Technically, none of these First Nations live on Indian Reserves, as we generally understand the term. Indeed, the eleven First Nations that have signed land claims own and manage their Class A lands effectively in fee simple. As no Reserves exist *per se*, how did Statistics Canada surmise that 30 percent of the population lived on what we will here call *shadow-reserves*?

There are terms and constructs that the federal government continues to use when talking about First Nations that are just not applicable in the Yukon. Two examples are in the continued application by the federal government of the colonial-era term “Indian Act Reserve,” which is commonly associated with First Nations lands in southern Canada, and in the misleading dichotomization of First Nations people as Indians living on-reserve or off-reserve when the federal government talks about Aboriginal residency. This continued use of now-obsolete terms made it an ongoing struggle for Yukon policy makers and statisticians to communicate effectively with Ottawa throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century. Unfortunately, it was all too alluring, for far too long, for those in Ottawa to rely on the simplified picture provided by these terms, even when the Yukon’s historically different land settlement and actual settled land claims—settled since the 1990s—broke the logic of the national time-series for Indian populations, one that packaged Aboriginal people through time as living either on-reserve or off-reserve. Consequently, Ottawa found it best just to ignore the situation! What was even more mystifying to the Yukon Bureau of Statistics is just where these sixteen Indian Reserves that Statistics Canada mentioned in their 2008 *Communique* could have been: even though they don’t appear on any official map of the Yukon, or any map published by Canada, they do have an administrative existence in Ottawa and in the *Census Dictionary*.

Figure 1 below provides an example of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada’s (AANDC) on-reserve/off-reserve data in play. The chart shows all of the provinces and territories lined up along the X-axis displaying their on- and off-reserve projected growth for 2004 to 2029, but the data for both Yukon and NWT is just incorrect. AANDC created a table that states, effectively, which Indians are off-reserve and which are on-reserve, which would be news to these Territorial residents! One wonders how this false dichotomization of the Yukon’s Aboriginal people has impacted funding over the years, or policy development, for that matter. The obscure reference to the Census Dictionary Table 8 (See Figure 2 below) that breaks out these populations was a revelation to the Yukon Bureaus of Statistics. The origins of how any of these communities got on this Census Dictionary Table 8 of On-Reserve Communities were apparently lost in the mists of time. For example, the village of Haines Junction, a community of 585 (2006 Census), is around 60 percent non-Aboriginal. While the village falls within the traditional territory of the Champagne Aishihik First Nation, the village area itself was not claimed by them in their successful Land Claim Settlement of 1995.

FIGURE 1: INAC - Projected Overall Growth (%) By Region, Medium Growth Scenario, 2004-2029



Source: Registered Indian Demography—Population, Household and Family Projections, 2004–2029. INAC Strategic Research and Analysis Directorate—CMHC Policy and Research Division.

So how did it get on the list? One Yukon expert suggested that a past chief had perhaps written to Ottawa requesting that land be set aside for the Champagne Band in the Haines Junction area and, *voilà*, it was entered onto the list. While this explanation must remain in the realm of “reserve legend,” the fact that the village was still being labelled as being on-reserve in 2006, after the land claim had been settled in 1996, begs the question of how often these lists are updated. That answer is as follows:

In all honesty, this is the first I have heard of the change. This doesn't really surprise me, as there have been instances where there have been self-government agreements negotiated to the point of completion, and the Office of the Registrar is not involved until after the fact (INAC correspondent, pers. comm.).

This answer was given eleven years after the change in land claim status, to be precise. We realize that the Yukon is about as far away from Ottawa as one can get, but really ... eleven years?

This issue of on-reserve populations not actually existing in the Yukon was first raised by the Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada's Yukon Regional Office in March of 2006 and was subsequently raised in 2007 by the Yukon Bureau of Statistics with regards to the AANDC online publication *Registered Indian Demography—Population, Household and Family Projections, 2004–2029*. This modeling scenario falters on two points: first, there is no on-reserve Registered Indian population in the Yukon, even if one attempted to use the term “on-reserve” in its most liberal interpretation, such as lands occupied by Registered Indians. Secondly, the land ownership position of eleven of Yukon's fourteen First Nations makes this a false categorization; for these First Nations *own and manage their lands*. As such, they can use lands as collateral for investment purposes: *these are not Indian reserves but lands held in fee simple*.² In the Yukon, most First Nations people speak of being *citizens and beneficiaries* of their First Nation: terms that the Census of

Canada cannot deal with, as they are just too idiosyncratic to the Yukon First Nations communities and a few other modern land claimants.³

So where exactly will we find this mysterious list of Indian reserves in the Yukon? *The Census Dictionary* provides us with the following instructions for calculating the on-reserve population in the Yukon (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2: Yukon Indian Reserves According to the 2006 Census Dictionary

| Table 8—Census Dictionary Selected <i>census</i> subdivisions included when tabulating ‘on-reserve’ population, 2006 Census | | |
|--|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| Standard geographical classification code | Census subdivision type | Census subdivision name |
| 6001036 | SE (settlement) | Tagish (Y.T.) |
| 6001037 | SE | Ross River (Y.T.) |
| 6001039 | SE | Burwash Landing (Y.T.) |
| 6001041 | SE | Pelly Crossing (Y.T.) |
| 6001042 | SE | Beaver Creek (Y.T.) |
| 6001043 | SE | Old Crow (Y.T.) |
| 6001047 | SE | Johnson’s Crossing (Y.T.) |
| 6001048 | SE | Carcross (Y.T.) |
| 6001032 | SE | Upper Liard (Y.T.) |
| 6001018 | VL (village) | Haines Junction (Y.T.) |
| 6001022 | VL | Mayo (Y.T.) |

Source: Statistics Canada, 2006 Census of Population. <http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census06/reference/dictionary/tables/table8-dictionary.htm>

After extensive discussion, review, and considerable pressure, the AANDC agreed to conduct a review of the “on-reserve” definition, and decided to remove all Yukon communities from the definition. After a two-year journey to update AANDC understanding of the geography of Yukon First Nations, Statistics Canada noted they will no longer produce standard products with on-reserve counts for Yukon, beginning with data from the 2011 Census (Aboriginal Statistics Program Social and Aboriginal Statistics Division, Statistics Canada, pers. comm.).

We must recognize that Statistics Canada is the “data gate” keeper and works closely with federal departments that help finance their research and survey programs. Statistics Canada’s work in the North has usually been undertaken with limited resources, but they are pro-active in this work and highly engaged. The role of agencies such as YBS and First Nations data managers is to be vigilant reviewers of Statistics Canada data and diligent correspondents providing regional context and local cultural references. While Statistics Canada data can be publicly accessed through CANSIM, it is the effectiveness and understanding with which that data is used both locally and nationally that is essential.

The Yukon Métis Nation Population—Expansion by Census Question Conflation

In 2008, the Yukon Métis Nation claimed that they represented 14.9 percent of the Yukon's population; a claim that came as a considerable surprise to the Yukon government, as well as to First Nations across the territory. A review of the 2006 Census data allowed the Yukon Bureau of Statistics and Statistics Canada to challenge the claim being made by this organization. The official Census figure for Métis in the Yukon was 800, based on replies to the identity question in the Census (or 805 with random rounding, Question 18, 2006 Census). To the best of our ability, we attempted to interpret the logic used by the Yukon Métis Nation to calculate a claim that 14.9 percent of the population was Métis; a claim that, if proven correct, could have been used by the Yukon Métis Nation to place demands on the Yukon and federal governments for future considerations and, perhaps, even a designated land base.⁴

Let us now look at how a Métis claim could have been derived for the 2006 Census figures. As originally designed, the identity question in the 2006 Census was devised to provide Aboriginal respondents with a range of possible answers. However, it is also a stand-alone question, and is not multi-part or linked to the question on Aboriginal ancestry (Question 17, Census 2006): they are two separate questions. The Yukon Métis Nation appears to have conflated answers to these questions into one response in order to attempt to unearth missing or perhaps misrepresented Métis people. As they did not respond to our request for clarification, we will never actually know how they formulated this logic. However, the "forensic" statistical analysis undertaken by StatCan at YBS's request did provide us with a 15.1 percent calculation, as seen below in Figure 3.

Based on the official statistics from the 2006 Census, eight hundred Yukon residents self-identified as Métis (depending on rounding), or 2.65 percent. The method that the Yukon Métis Nation appears to have used to calculate their incorrect figure of 14.9 percent consisted of adding together responses from separate census questions on identity and ancestry, which is, effectively, double counting. As well, it appears that they assumed that Yukon Aboriginal people answering the ancestry question as North American Indian and non-Aboriginal Ancestries were Métis, but if these people had wanted to self-identify as Métis, then they would have done so under Métis single origin. In all likelihood, Aboriginal people who identified as having *North American Indian and non-Aboriginal ancestries* were already members of one of the Yukon's First Nations and listed themselves as a North American Indian in a single response in the identity question. This data conflation, in which separate Census questions were combined, indicates either a fundamental lack of understanding of how the Census is designed and reported, or sensationalism on the part of the Yukon Métis Nation.

FIGURE 3: Aboriginal Identity and Aboriginal Ancestry Conflated

| Aboriginal Identity (8), Area of Residence (6), Age Groups (12) and Sex (3) for the Population of Canada, Provinces and Territories, 2006 Census—20% Sample Data | | |
|---|--------------------------------|----------|
| Geography: Yukon Territory / Territoire du Yukon (60) 00010 | | |
| | Total—Area of residence | |
| | # | % |
| Total—Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal identity population | 30,190 | |
| Total Aboriginal identity population | 7,580 | |
| North American Indian single response | 6,275 | |
| Métis single response* | 805 | 2.7 |
| Inuit single response | 255 | |
| Multiple Aboriginal identity responses | 55 | |
| Aboriginal responses not included elsewhere | 190 | |
| Non-Aboriginal identity population | 22,610 | |
| Aboriginal Ancestry (10), Area of Residence (6), Age Groups (12) and Sex (3) for the Population of Canada, Provinces and Territories, 2006 Census—20% Sample Data | | |
| Geography: Yukon Territory / Territoire du Yukon (60) 00010 | | |
| | Total—Area of residence | |
| | # | % |
| Total—Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ancestry population | 30,195 | |
| Total Aboriginal ancestry population | 7,810 | |
| North American Indian single ancestry | 3,560 | |
| <i>North American Indian and non-Aboriginal ancestries</i> | 3,235 | 10.7 |
| <i>Métis single ancestry</i> | 140 | 0.5 |
| <i>Métis and non-Aboriginal ancestries</i> | 360 | 1.2 |
| Inuit single ancestry | 140 | |
| Inuit and non-Aboriginal ancestries | 105 | |
| Other Aboriginal multiple ancestries | 275 | |
| Non-Aboriginal ancestry population | 22,380 | |
| Total Métis identity/ancestries if combined | 4540# | 15.1% |
| * Individuals reporting themselves as Métis to the identity question (Question #18) may also report that they have Métis ancestry to the ethnic origin question (Question #17). | | |
| # Includes double counting of people | | |

Source: Special Data Analysis request, Yukon Bureau of Statistics, and prepared by Aboriginal Statistics Program Social and Aboriginal Statistics Division, Statistics Canada, 2008.

First Nations Government in Yukon —7 Percent of Jobs! Who Knew?

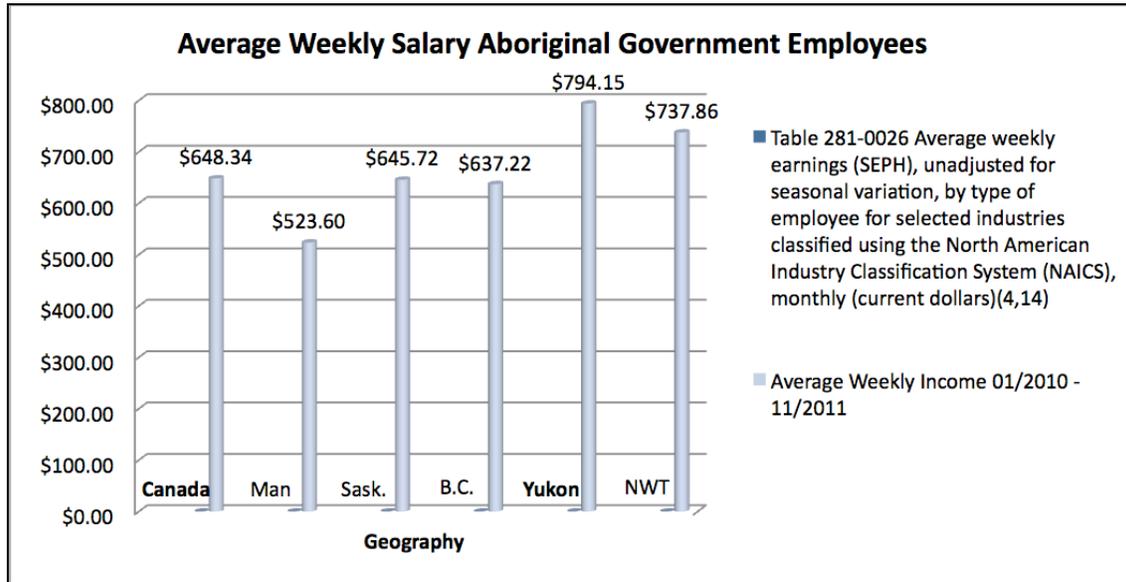
Statistics Canada conducts two major monthly labour market surveys in the Yukon. The first is their well-known flagship the Labour Force Survey (LFS), which covers employment, wages, and hours worked (LFS), and is delivered as a household survey.⁵ The second, less well known, is the Survey of Employment and Payroll Hours (SEPH), which is an industry-based survey that uses taxation records. SEPH is an administrative survey that collects data from Canada Revenue Agency records and data from the Business Payroll Survey to provide information on the number of jobs occupied in the market place, as well as data on the type of job and payroll information. SEPH breaks out the type-of-job information in considerable detail, depending on the size of the category in question, using the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS). These classifications get very precise and include detailed descriptions. SEPH provides data on the number of jobs in the economy, while the Labour Force Survey (LFS) counts the number of people employed. For example, the Labour Force Survey tell us if you are employed or unemployed, while SEPH tells us the number of jobs in the economy—basically, SEPH informs us that an employed person might have one, two, or more separate jobs. There are generally more jobs in an economy than people employed.

One of the data sets recently released onto Statistics Canada's CANSIM web portal is Line 914 of the Survey of Employment and Payroll Hours (SEPH), which covers Aboriginal government employment. This data should be of considerable interest to those studying the impacts of Aboriginal self-government on the employment numbers and earning power associated with First Nations self-government. Originally requested by the Yukon Bureau of Statistics as a special data run, it was initially considered by Statistics Canada to be unreleasable due to low data quality and/or other reasons for suppression. However, after review and assessment, the data began to flow and was then added as a publicly available and free data set on CANSIM in 2011.

While suppression due to poor quality still occurs from month to month, the data is of considerable interest as it gives us a glimpse of the impact of self-government on payrolls and employment or, to be crude, of the money and jobs that flow within the Yukon's First Nations. Yukon SEPH Line 914 covers seventeen First Nation government organizations (probably the fourteen First Nations, the two Linguistic Councils, and the Council of Yukon First Nations [CYFN]—I say probably, because this information cannot be released for confidentiality reasons).⁶

The Yukon SEPH data gives us a measure through time of employment numbers and payroll, starting with data reporting for most months and years since 2001. It can also allow us to compare Yukon employment numbers and payrolls to other jurisdictions on a monthly basis or annually. Comparing to other jurisdictions can be fraught with challenges, so these would need to be considered by researchers exploring these data sets.

FIGURE 4: Survey of Employment and Payroll Hours

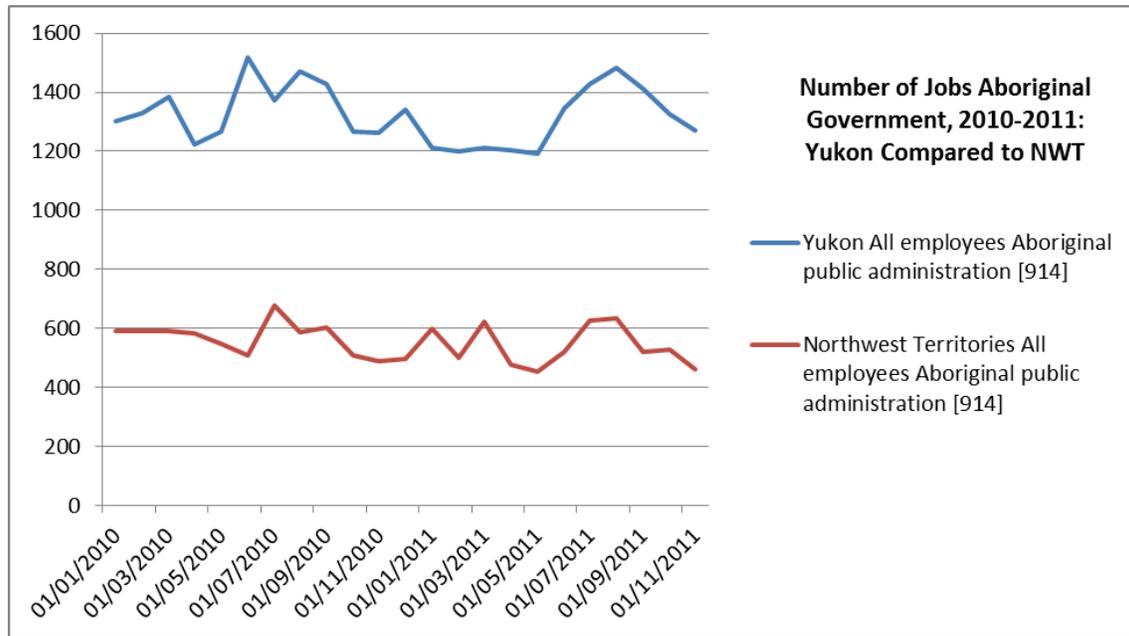


Source: Statistics Canada, Table 281-0026 Survey of Employment and Payroll Hours, 2011.

As seen in Figure 4, the average weekly income for people employed by the Yukon’s First Nation governments was around \$150 more per week than the Canadian average for similar work, and was the highest of all reporting jurisdictions.⁷ Now, not all staff employed at First Nation governments are of Aboriginal descent, but this does provide one measure of the value of these jobs in the Aboriginal economy and for the Yukon. Yukon wages are generally higher than those in the rest of Canada, but usually rank below those of Alberta (not reported here, due also to data suppression) and the NWT.

A second SEPH indicator of the value of self-government to the Yukon is the absolute number of First Nations government jobs, the percentage contribution of those jobs to the Yukon’s total number of jobs, and the recognition that, in the regions of highest unemployment in the Yukon (that being outside of Whitehorse), self-government jobs are a boon to the rural and remote communities that would otherwise have even higher unemployment rates.

What Figure 5 (below) illustrates is that, although the Yukon’s Aboriginal population is only 25 percent of the total Yukon population (approx. 35,000), and the Aboriginal population of the NWT stands at around 50 percent of a total population of some 42,000 people, the number of First Nations government jobs generated in the Yukon is more than double the number in the NWT. The trend lines also indicate that both populations follow the same seasonality patterns, with peaks being in the summer (probably firewood cutting, road work, trail clearing, summer student employment, and recreation programs).

FIGURE 5: SEPH Jobs in Aboriginal Government Compared Yukon to NWT 2010-2011

Source: Table 281-0023 Employment (SEPH), unadjusted for seasonal variation, by type of employee for selected industries classified using the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS), monthly (persons) (4,14).

Meanwhile, in the Yukon, the 1481 government jobs represented about 7 percent of the Yukon's total SEPH employment numbers (jobs), which are estimated at just around 20,000 in 2011. Now, as an example, take the month of August 2011 in the Yukon, where First Nation government employed 1481 people at an average payroll (including overtime) of \$801.91. That means that in this month the average weekly payroll was \$1,187,629; a substantial contribution to the local economy. Comparisons between employment in Aboriginal government versus all other public services indicates that working for First Nations government is not as remunerative as that of other government services, but the jobs are more often local and community-based, rather than just being in Whitehorse.

Within the vast universe of Statistics Canada data sets, I have selected three examples that speak to the challenges and, often times, frustrations that we face in trying to explain regional and cultural differences as they apply to First Nations and Aboriginal data more generally. Statistics Canada provides a wealth of data and information for Aboriginal research but, as with SEPH line 914 on Aboriginal Government employment and wages, it is often what is not being released that is of the greatest importance to those of us who research Aboriginal policy issues. I wonder what other data sets of this nature exist locked away in the StatCan vaults at Tunney's Pasture. If a frustrated First Nation government manager had not picked up the phone and asked the simple question "*how many people work for our government?*", YBS would not have begun the process of getting the SEPH data released. We just need to keep asking the right questions.

With the 2012 federal budget having reduced the First Nations Statistical Institute's budget by 50 percent next year and to zero (0) the follow fiscal year, First Nations will be thrown back to having to rely on Statistics Canada and/or their provincial or territorial statistical agency for the data they need for evidence-based policy making. However, StatCan itself has suffered considerable staff reductions. Arm yourselves well; know what data is available and how best you can use administrative and survey data to support your arguments and pitch your policies.

Notes

1. Statistics Canada, *Census Communiqué (Press Release)*, January 15, 2008; received by e-mail, Yukon Bureau of Statistics.
2. The lands are a form of "Collective" fee simple. In most cases, a vote requiring a 75 percent approval level would be needed to alienate the land from a First Nations' ownership (pers. comm., AANDC—Yukon Regional Office).
3. Statistics Canada. Report on Regional Discussions on Aboriginal Identification Questions (2008; <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-629-x/89-629-x2008001-eng.htm>). This is review that YBS participated in, raising the issue of new terminology such as citizenship and beneficiaries.
4. The Yukon government has no official policy towards the Métis people in the Territory.
5. LFS measures the employment characteristics of people in households who are active the labour market (includes, working, unemployed and not looking for work) collected as a representative sample across the Yukon using telephone survey methodology.
6. In conversation with SEPH staff at Statistics Canada, we do know that all seventeen governments are resident in the Yukon. This implies that no Northern BC First Nation governments are included, and no NWT organizations.
7. I have had to use just these jurisdictions as the suppression was very high for the other provinces, hampering comparability. Nunavut is not included here as it is a self-governing Inuit society.