

*Where Exactly Are All the  
First Nation Businesses?  
Interpreting the First Nation Business  
Environment in the Yukon, 2008-2021*

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**ABSTRACT**

The Yukon has one of the fastest growing, albeit smallest, economies in Canada, with an increasing population and a tight labour market. Modern treaties and self-government agreements have empowered First Nations governments, and Supreme Court decisions and treaty rights secured Indigenous governments a significant place in the resource sector. Yet Yukon First Nation businesspeople are not yet benefiting fully from this positive political and economic situation. This paper explores the underrepresentation of the Yukon First Nation businesspeople in the economy by examining the available data from the Yukon Business Survey (YBS), a census of Canada self-employment data, and a new national program at Statistics Canada that is working to better identify the presence of Indigenous businesses within the national economy. The research shows that work still needs to be done to better support the development of Indigenous businesspeople as they strive to break through the barriers that have left them on the margins of the northern economy.

*Key Words:* Indigenous economic development, Yukon First Nations business development

## INTRODUCTION

In 2000, David Newhouse stated, “While the paths that Aboriginal economies are choosing are different, most are encouraging the development of a business community as one of the primary driving forces for economic development” (p. 69). However, some two decades later, it is still a struggle to define the Indigenous business community in Canada. While enthusiasts of Indigenous business talk of the \$100 billion Indigenous economy (Hilton, 2021), and while several mega-deals have changed public perceptions of Indigenous businesses, Indigenous peoples are still severely underrepresented in business. First Nations business owners face unique challenges in forging new business opportunities and new firms, including limited access to financial capital, small cohorts of skilled Indigenous workers and professionals, small home markets that are often economically disadvantaged, and remote regions with long supply lines (Jafri & Alasia, 2019).

The recent study *Linking Indigenous Communities with Regional Development in Canada* (2020) found that according to the Community Well-Being Index, 98 of the 100 lowest ranked communities are First Nations communities (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD]). In 2023, Statistics Canada reported that one-third (33.7%) of Indigenous majority-owned business did not have the cash or liquid assets to operate over the next quarter, compared to 23.9% of all private sector businesses. They also found a considerable drop in the number of Indigenous businesses in Canada between the first and second quarters of 2022, with Indigenous majority-owned businesses slumping from 23,530 in Q1 2022 to 17,417 in Q2 2022 (Statistics Canada, 2023a).<sup>1</sup> That’s a decline of over one-quarter of all Indigenous firms in a single quarter in 2022. Majority-owned Indigenous businesses in Q2 2022 represented only 1.7% of all Canadian businesses, similar in number to businesses owned by persons with a disability and far less than visible minorities (15.4%) and women (19.1%) (Statistics Canada, 2022a). While the small percentage of Indigenous-owned companies may be a consequence of owners struggling to restart their businesses after the pandemic, Chernoff and Cheung (2023) note that many Indigenous communities lack basic infrastructure such as full-time banking services, accounting firms, and business coaches—let alone investors. Additionally, labour shortage was cited by 30% of Indigenous firms as a major obstacle to success (Statistics Canada, 2023a).

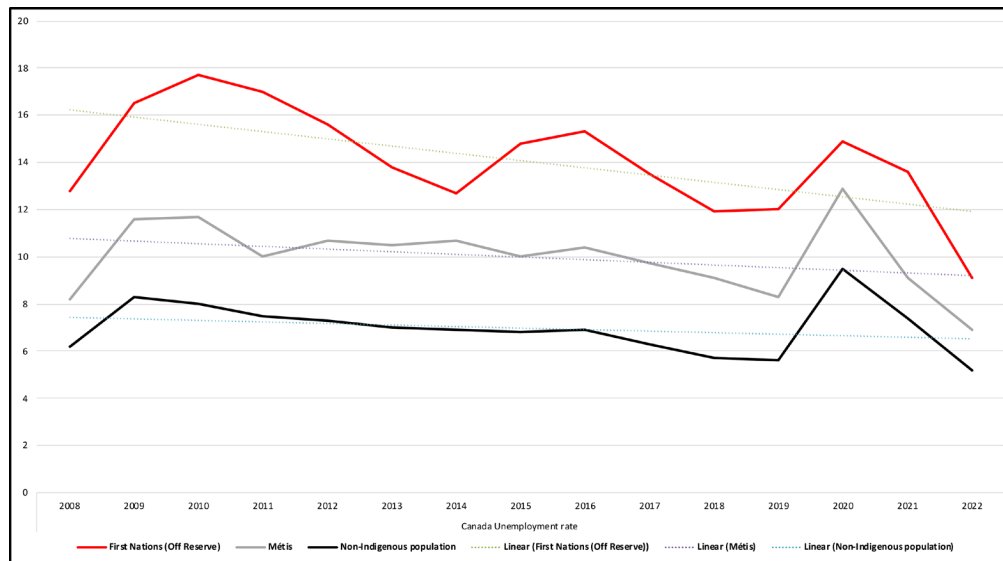
The remoteness and small population markets commonly associated with Indigenous communities make it difficult and costly to access emergency business services in a timely manner, whether that involves sourcing freon for a broken freezer at a grocery store or finding repair staff to restore internet access.<sup>2</sup> And these challenges are exacerbated by the devastating legacy of residential schools (Bleakney & Melvin, 2022). Unemployment in many Indigenous communities remains high, while high school and university graduation rates remain well below the national average (Anderson, 2021). And, while Warren Weir (2007) concluded his study of Indigenous small business and entrepreneurship by stating, “Small business development and entrepreneurship are in the end community and government tools that, if structured and managed properly, will undoubtedly assist in the promotion, development, and ongoing support of healthy,

self-governing, and self-sustaining communities” (p. 52), the Yukon statistical data from 2008 to 2021 does not support his optimism. Starting and maintaining a business in a small Indigenous community has challenges well beyond those of a start-up in larger urban centres. These challenges begin with access to capital and credit. de Soto (2000) estimates that 70% of businesspeople in the Western world started their firms based on capital available to them through the mortgaging of their own homes, a form of collateral not commonly available to First Nations people (Peredo et al., 2022).

Even with these limitations, First Nations entrepreneurs strive to open businesses, invest in their communities, and build the Canadian economy. However, First Nations businesses are severely underrepresented in the Canadian and Yukon economies, a problem that requires focused attention if First Nations communities are to prosper by attracting capital to their communities. Part of the problem is the effects of COVID-19 on First Nations communities, especially those on reserves. As the COVID-19 pandemic swept across Canada in 2020 and 2021, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs heard repeatedly that First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people and their communities were more vulnerable than other Canadians to the virus (Indigenous and Northern Affairs, 2021). The Parliamentary report points to a plethora of concerns—many present prior to the pandemic—raised by witnesses: inequalities in housing, health, broadband/telecommunications, basic connectivity (road, rail, air), and water and wastewater treatment. In 2020, the list grew to include concerns about increased food insecurity, amplified mental health problems, limited access to COVID-19 protective gear and medical treatment, and the growing need for vaccination education and communications (Polsky & Garriguet, 2022). Angele Alook, Shelia Block, and Grace-Edward Galabuzi show that “on average, over the period July 2020 to June 2021, 28 percent of Indigenous peoples lived with economic insecurity compared to 16 percent of white households” (2021, p. 4).

But there may be a silver lining: coming out of COVID-19, the increasing demand for labour in Canada is giving more First Nations workers entry into the work force, driving First Nations (off-reserve)<sup>3</sup> unemployment rates to 9.1%, which is the lowest point in the labour force record (see Figure 1). One would expect that Indigenous businesses would be a significant driver of this increase in Indigenous labour force participation.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Canada First Nations (Off-Reserve), Métis, and**  
**Non-Indigenous Unemployment Rate, 2008 - 2022**



*Note.* Data is from *Table 14-10-0365-01 Labour Force Characteristics by Region and Detailed Indigenous Group* by Statistics Canada, 2024 (<https://doi.org/10.25318/1410036501-eng>).

This paper seeks to better understand the level of inequality blocking Indigenous businesspeople from equitable access to the marketplace. The Yukon has been collecting business survey data and reporting on First Nations business activity through the Yukon Business Survey (YBS) since 2008, providing a unique time series. More recently, Canada has begun to address the major gap in its Indigenous business registry after consultations with the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business (CCAB). This paper uses three sources to assess the level of First Nations business activity in the Yukon:

1. YBS from 2008-2021
2. Data from Statistics Canada, which for the first time in 2022 generated national statistical data on the number of Indigenous businesses in Canada, broken out by First Nations, Métis, and Inuit
3. Self-employment data from the Census of Canada, broken out by Indigenous and non-Indigenous categories using the Indigenous Census profile

Each of these three datasets presents challenges for the user. They are not seamless, and they cannot be readily woven together to form a precise profile of First Nations business activity in the Yukon. Collectively, though, they begin to build a baseline of what First Nations business activity looks like in the Yukon and suggest the need for

policies that better support First Nation business development in the Yukon. Policies such as the Government of Yukon's 2022 First Nations Procurement Policy may, in time, drive government contracts towards First Nations businesses, increasing revenue and improving access to capital.

### **FIRST NATIONS BUSINESS OWNERSHIP IN THE YUKON: ASSESSING THE YUKON BUSINESS SURVEY DATA**

A preliminary analysis of data acquired from the YBS from 2008-2021 indicates that despite 22% of the Yukon population having Indigenous heritage, First Nations peoples are not developing businesses at an equivalent rate (Statistics Canada, 2021). Geographically, Indigenous people represent 36% of the rural Yukon's population and about 18% of Whitehorse's population (Statistics Canada, 2018). But in Whitehorse, Indigenous business owners from the two resident First Nations (the Kwanlin Dun and Ta'an Kwach'an Council) represent only seven locally owned firms out of 2,408—a minuscule 0.3%. (That said, many businesses in Whitehorse are owned by members of other Yukon and non-Yukon First Nations.) The results are somewhat better in rural Yukon where the majority of the population is of First Nations heritage, but underrepresentation persists.

In 2008, the Yukon Bureau of Statistics included new questions into the YBS that sought to capture information on First Nations business ownership as well as ownership by gender. The YBS provided annual results between 2008-2010 and biannual results from 2013-2021 (see Table 3). It is the only instrument of its kind in Canada that specifically seeks information on First Nations business ownership and offers a time series for such data.<sup>4</sup> Nationally, the CCAB runs numerous surveys of Indigenous businesses in Canada, while Statistics Canada has developed more efficient Indigenous business reporting in the past few years. Indigenous business survey data is essential to better understand the Indigenous community's increasing role in the national economy. Benchmark surveys like the YBS measure First Nations business activity in the Territory and show how it has changed over time. In Canada, the Indigenous community (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit) now represent 5% of the national population and Statistics Canada estimates the gross domestic product attributable to Indigenous peoples was \$48.9 billion for 2020, up from \$41.7 billion in 2012 (Statistics Canada, 2023a).

The Yukon Bureau of Statistics, Statistics Canada, and the CCAB all recognize the importance of standardized nomenclature for Indigenous-owned businesses. The commonly accepted level of ownership is recognized as being 51% Indigenous. In 2021, the National Aboriginal Capital Corporations Association published a comprehensive overview of the issue of defining Indigenous businesses in Canada and documented the different policies in place nationally. For the CCAB the benchmark is a 51% Indigenous stake in a firm, but in the Yukon the definition is more complex.

A Yukon First Nation Business meets one of the following criteria:

- (i) a corporation or not-for-profit corporation where one or more Yukon First Nations is the direct or beneficial owner of 100% of the shares of the corporation;
- (ii) a sole proprietorship owned by a Yukon First Nation Person;
- (iii) a partnership or limited partnership where at least 50% of the partnership is owned by a Yukon First Nation Person or an organization described in (i) or (ii);
- (iv) a corporation with at least 51% of the corporation's voting shares owned by a Yukon First Nation Person or an organization described in (i) or (ii); or
- (v) a not-for-profit organization in good standing under the Societies Act with at least 51% of its membership comprised of Yukon First Nations people.

A sole proprietorship owned by a non-Yukon First Nation Person, which supports a Yukon First Nation spouse or common law partner, and/or a Yukon First Nation family, may qualify as a Yukon First Nation Business. *The Government will engage the relevant Yukon First Nation government during its review* [emphasis added]. (Yukon First Nation Chamber of Commerce, n.d.)

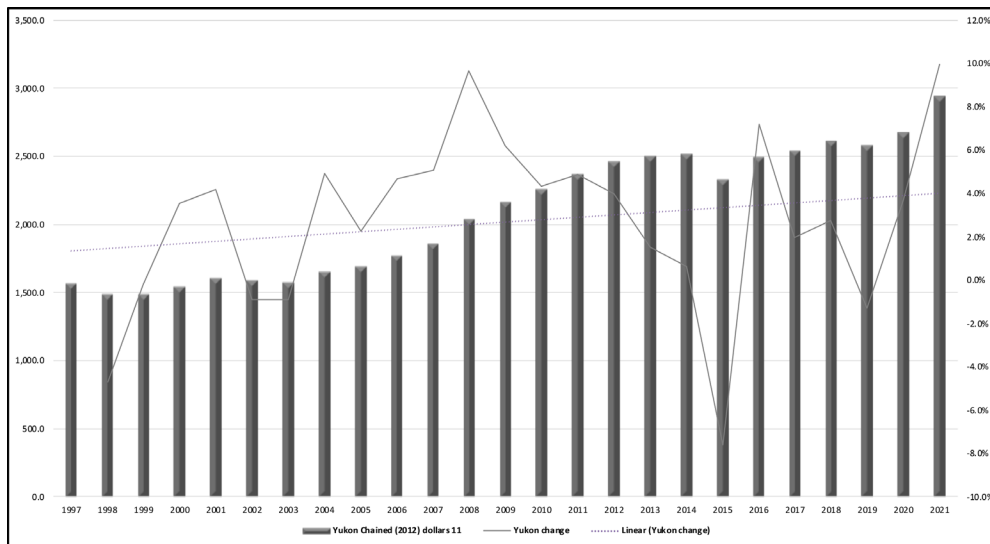
As the National Aboriginal Capital Corporations Association's 2021 report notes, "Fraudulent misrepresentation of Indigenous identity is endemic in Canada, which presents significant barriers for businesses that are authentically Indigenous" (p. 3). In the Yukon there was little advantage to claiming to be a First Nations business prior to 2022, when the First Nations procurement policy was enacted by the Yukon legislature. The YBS requests that Indigenous firms self-identify and requires 51% Indigenous ownership for a business to be considered First Nation owned. In Yukon Business Survey, Results by First Nation Ownership, 2019, the Yukon Bureau of Statistics provides the following definition of a First Nations business:

*The definition of a business for this survey includes industries within the business sector and does not include any level of government, crown corporations or non-profit organizations (NPOs). For the purpose of this report, businesses with any percentage of ownership held by a Yukon First Nation, a Yukon First Nation Development Corporation, or individuals belonging to a Yukon First Nation (self-identification basis) is categorized as **businesses with First Nation shares in ownership**. A **First Nation (FN) business** is defined as a business enterprise which has at least 51% of ownership held by a Yukon First Nation, a Yukon First Nation Development Corporation<sup>5</sup>, or individuals belonging to a Yukon First Nation (self-identification*

basis). FN businesses constitute a subset of businesses with FN shares in ownership. (2021, p. 1, emphasis in the original)

The YBS provides a unique opportunity to analyze the changes in First Nations entrepreneurship in a region where Indigenous self-government has greatly expanded. The Yukon has also witnessed substantial economic growth (based largely on government expenditures) and population increases that continued regardless of the economic downturn caused by the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic (see Figure 2). The Territory regularly has one of the lowest unemployment rates in the country and usually has the third-highest average weekly salary behind the Northwest Territories and Alberta. While mining and mineral exploration have not reached the heights predicted in 2007, hard rock mining is still active in the Yukon.

**FIGURE 2**  
**Yukon Gross Domestic Product (GDP) at Basic Prices, by Industry, Provinces, and Territories (x 1,000,000) with Annual Change**

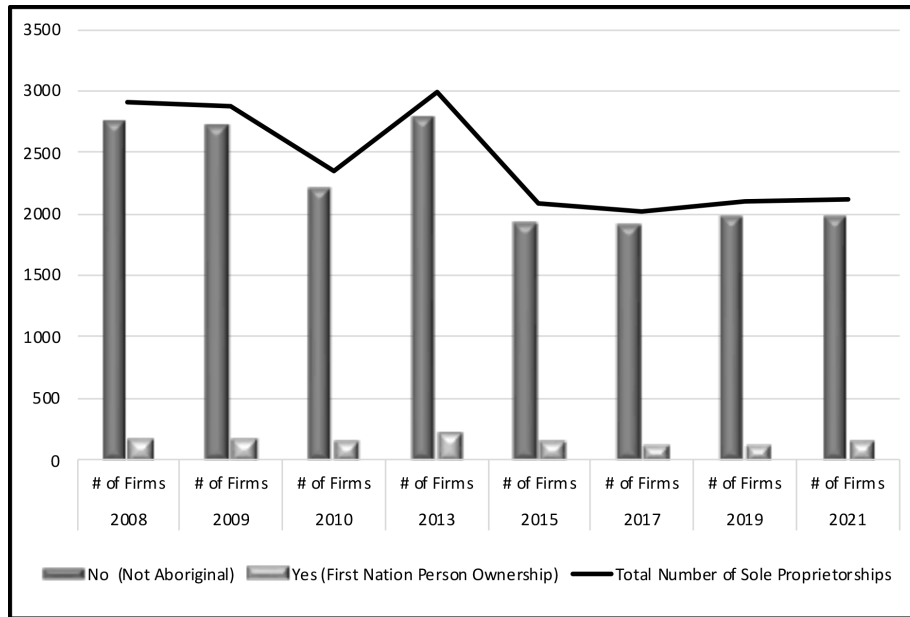


Note. Data is from *Table: 36-10-0402-01 (formerly CANSIM 379-0030) Gross domestic product at basic prices, by industry, provinces and territories* by Statistics Canada, 2021

Yet as shown in Figure 3, First Nations business ownership is minuscule compared to the non-Indigenous businesses that dominate the Yukon business environment. While First Nations people made up nearly one quarter of the Yukon’s population in 2021, they only owned 152 of 2120 companies, or 7.2% of all sole proprietor and partnership businesses. Figure 3 shows that the trendline for First Nations business ownership is negative. It peaked in 2013 and has generally been declining, though 2021 showed

improvement (although this improvement may be due to the inclusion of a non-Yukon First Nation category in the 2019 business survey reports that added 54 and then 35 businesses to the total).

**FIGURE 3**  
**Yukon First Nation Business Ownership Compared to Non-First Nation over Time, 2008-2021**



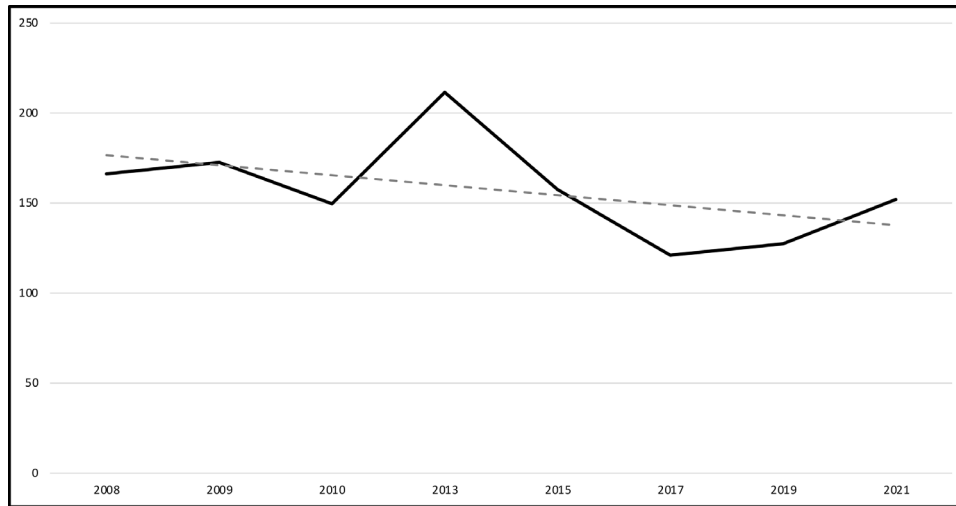
An overview of Gueye, et al.’s (2022) Identifying Indigenous Business Owners and Indigenous-Owned Businesses noted a similar trend:

From 2005 to 2015, the number of Indigenous-owned businesses trended upward (+3.5 percent on average), although at a generally decreasing rate from year to year. Non-Indigenous-owned businesses also grew at a comparable rate over the same period (+3.3 percent on average). The number of Indigenous-owned businesses contracted in each of the subsequent years, whereas the number of non-Indigenous-owned businesses decreased only in 2018. (Statistics Canada, 2022)

Given that the Indigenous population of the Yukon fluctuates at around 25% of the population, we should expect First Nations business ownership to be in that range. However, the First Nations business ownership rate falls well short of the 23% range that should be expected, ranging from 5.7% in 2008 to a high of 7.2% in 2021 with 152 businesses: for context, if First Nations business ownership reflected their population numbers, there should be 450-490 Indigenous firms (see Figure 4).

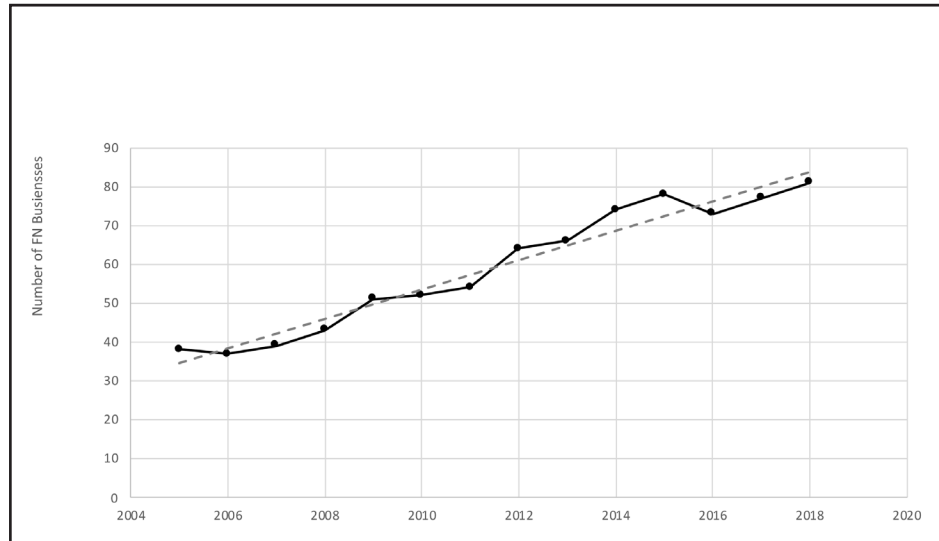


**FIGURE 4**  
**Declining Trends in Yukon First Nation Person**  
**Business Ownership: 2008-2021**



However, a 2022 report released by Statistics Canada (Gueye et al., 2022) provides a different perspective on First Nations business ownership (see Figure 5). Unlike the Yukon’s 51% ownership threshold, Statistics Canada sets its threshold at 50% Indigenous owned. Additionally, Statistics Canada data includes private incorporated businesses and unincorporated employers, while the Yukon includes sole proprietors and partnerships. Ultimately, the difference between the two estimates hinges on the Yukon’s inclusion of self-employed individuals, which they label as “home-based workers.” So even though both datasets use First Nations as the business group identifier, they provide different results. For example, in 2008, Statistics Canada reported 43 First Nations businesses in the Yukon, while the Yukon reported 166. Likewise, the Yukon database suggests a decline in the number of First Nations businesses over time while Statistics Canada demonstrates a strong positive trend (see Figure 5).

**FIGURE 5**  
**Yukon Businesses Owned by First Nations,**  
**Statistics Canada Estimate 2005-2018**

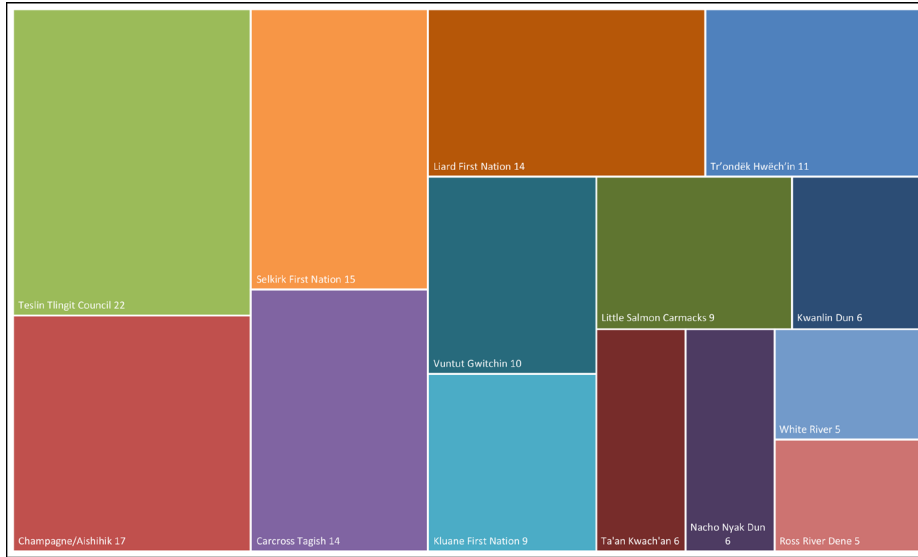


Yukon’s First Nations businesses can be further categorized by the business owner’s First Nation membership or association: Figures 6 and 7 show the distribution of these businesses in 2010 and 2021, respectively.<sup>6</sup> Before proceeding, though, it is important to note one significant difference between the 2010 and 2021 surveys. The goal of the 2010 survey was to develop a baseline for better understanding how Yukon First Nations were transitioning into the market economy,<sup>7</sup> and as a result, it did not ask if non-Yukon Indigenous people were business owners. In 2019 the First Nations question was expanded to accept replies from non-Yukon First Nations: consequently, thirty-five additional non-First Nations businesses were captured in the 2021 survey. Both surveys rely on the self-declaration of Indigenous ownership.

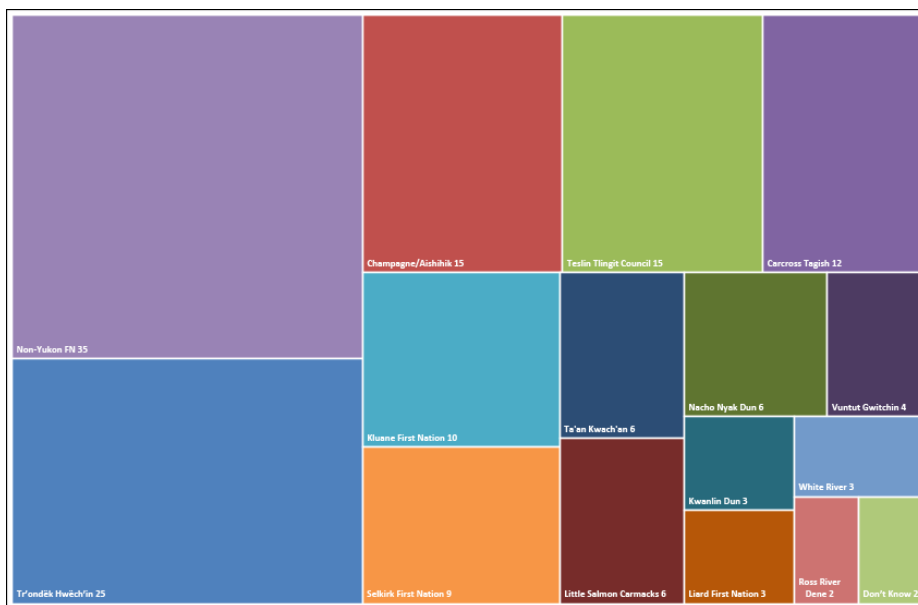
Comparing Figures 6 and 7 shows there has been considerable change in the representation of First Nations in the business survey record. In 2010, there were 149 First Nations businesses connected to Yukon First Nations, and all fourteen Yukon First Nations were represented. The most prominent were the Teslin Tlingit Council with 22 businesses, the Champagne and Aishihik (CAFN) with 17, the Selkirk with 15, the Carcross Tagish (CTFN) with 14, and the Liard First Nation with 14. These five First Nations accounted for 55% of the First Nations businesses surveyed in 2010. However, non-Yukon First Nations businesses are the single largest category in the 2021 survey, with ten more firms than the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in First Nation (THFN) in Dawson City. Removing the non-Yukon category from Figure 7 leaves only 121 firms spread among all fourteen Yukon First Nations: THFN with 25 businesses, CAFN and TTC with 15 each, the CTFN with 12, and the Kluane First Nation with 11. These five First Nations represent 64.4% of all Yukon First Nations businesses, suggesting a greater concentration

among the leading five First Nations. Ultimately, comparing the 2010 and 2021 survey results shows that there was a 18.9% decline in Yukon First Nations businesses over roughly a decade—despite Yukon’s economy growing by 23.1% between 2010-2021. Clearly, this economic growth did not spur the development of new Yukon First Nations businesses.

**FIGURE 6**  
**Yukon First Nations Businesses by First Nation Membership, 2010**



**FIGURE 7**  
**Yukon First Nations Businesses by First Nation Membership, 2021**



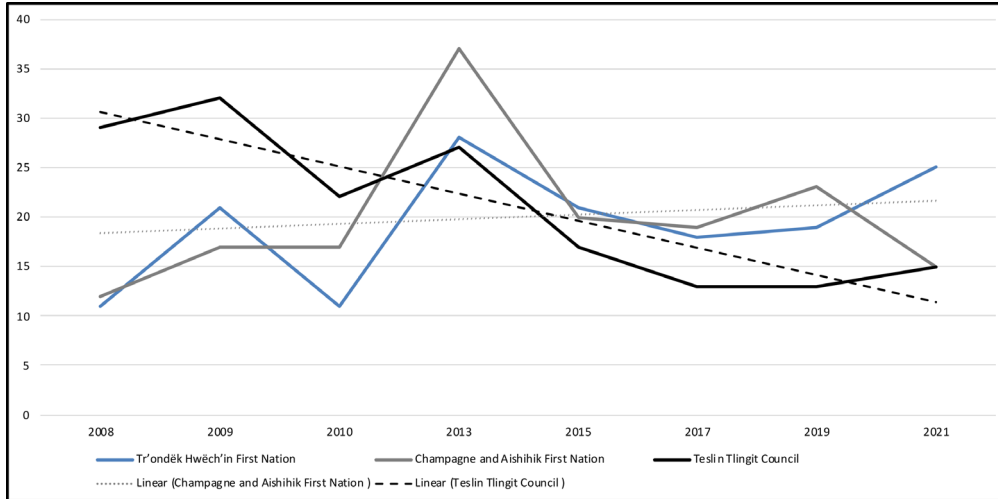
## YUKON FIRST NATION OWNERSHIP BUSINESS TRENDS

Figures 8 through 11 illustrate the change in Yukon First Nations business participation, categorized by membership. Once again, these are self-declared members, and the companies may or may not be located in their traditional territory or home community, as First Nation members from any community can operate anywhere within the Yukon or further afield. Indeed, given Whitehorse's dominance with approximately 32,000 people in the greater census area out of a total population of 44,000, it is likely that members from all 14 First Nations are operating in the City. (For comparison, the next largest town is Dawson City at around 2,300 people.) Additionally, the number of non-Yukon First Nations proprietors grew from five non-Yukon First Nations proprietors in 2019 to thirty-five in 2021 (Yukon Bureau of Statistics, 2020; Yukon Bureau of Statistics, 2022c). As the Yukon is one of the hottest economies in Canada with a nationally significant population increase, it is likely attracting new business owners and subsidiaries of out-of-territory Indigenous firms to the region.

The three First Nations shown in Figure 8 are self-governing political entities with strong development corporations. Members of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation, whose main population centre is Dawson City and who capitalize on the Klondike highway's substantial 'rubber tire' tourism traffic, show a slightly positive trend in their business communities' development between 2008 and 2021, increasing from 11 to 25 businesses. Likewise, the Champagne and Aishihik First Nation of Haines Junction also have a positive trendline, starting from a 2008 base of 12 businesses, with 15 businesses active in 2021. The Champagne and Aishihik First Nation also capitalizes on highway traffic between Whitehorse and the Alaska Border and benefits from the tourism trade associated with Kluane National Park. The trendlines for these two First Nations peaked in 2013 with 28 associated businesses for the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in and 37 for the Champagne and Aishihik. From 2013 to 2021, the Champagne and Aishihik lost 22 associated businesses while the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in businesses declined by 13. While the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in decline continued through the 2019 survey year, it recovered in 2021, adding six new businesses to their community. However, the Champagne and Aishihik trend continued to decline through 2021, dropping from 23 businesses in 2019 to 15 in 2021 during the pandemic.

The third community shown in Figure 8 is the Teslin Tlingit Council. Teslin is a small community along the Alaska Highway south of Whitehorse, in cottage country. It has a progressive approach to community development as seen by its biomass district heating system, which provides renewable energy for government buildings and new housing units, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and lowering energy costs (Byers, 2019). While once leading all Yukon First Nations in generating businesses between 2008 and 2010, Teslin dropped to third place in 2013 and continued to decline in number with only 13 businesses in the 2019 survey before increasing to 15 in the 2021 survey.

FIGURE 8  
Selected Trends in First Nation Business Activity, 2008 -2021



The three First Nations represented in Figure 9 all have negative trendlines, indicating that since 2008 their representation in the Yukon business community has declined. In 2013 Carcross Tagish businesspeople accounted for 21 businesses, but they dipped to only eight in 2019 before rebounding to twelve in 2021. The Selkirk First Nation followed a similar path, despite the potential economic benefits of the Minto Mine, which came into production in October 2007 (*Minto Copper-Gold, 2010*). Employment at the mine decreased from 307 in 2016 to 201 in 2017 and down to only 100 in 2019; the mine was closed in 2018 and sold to British mining firm Pembridge Resources PLC in June 2019 (*Minto Copper-Gold, 2010*). This drop in mine employment coincides with the decline in businesses owned by Selkirk residents from 12 in 2015 to only three in 2019. And while production ramped up in 2021, with employment at the mine increasing to 177 and Selkirk businesses likewise increasing to nine firms, the mine closed again in 2023. The final group, the Nacho Näyk Dun, live in the relatively isolated Stewart Valley some 410 km northeast of Whitehorse. Despite silver, lead, zinc, and gold mining activity in the region, this First Nation failed to generate many businesses, dropping from its zenith of twelve in 2013 to only six in 2021. This occurred well after the Victoria Gold mine had opened and was generating hundreds of millions of dollars of revenue locally during construction and production.

**FIGURE 9**  
**Selected Trends in First Nations Business Activity, 2008 -2021**

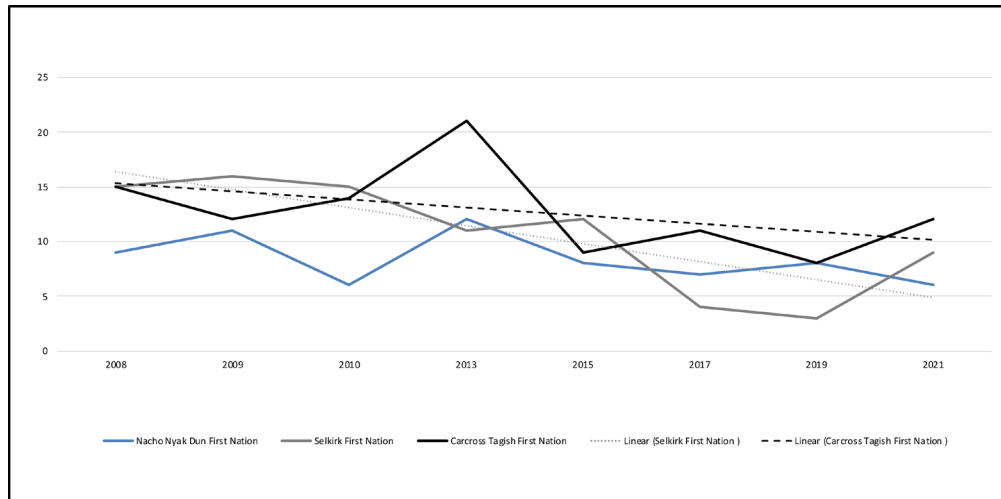
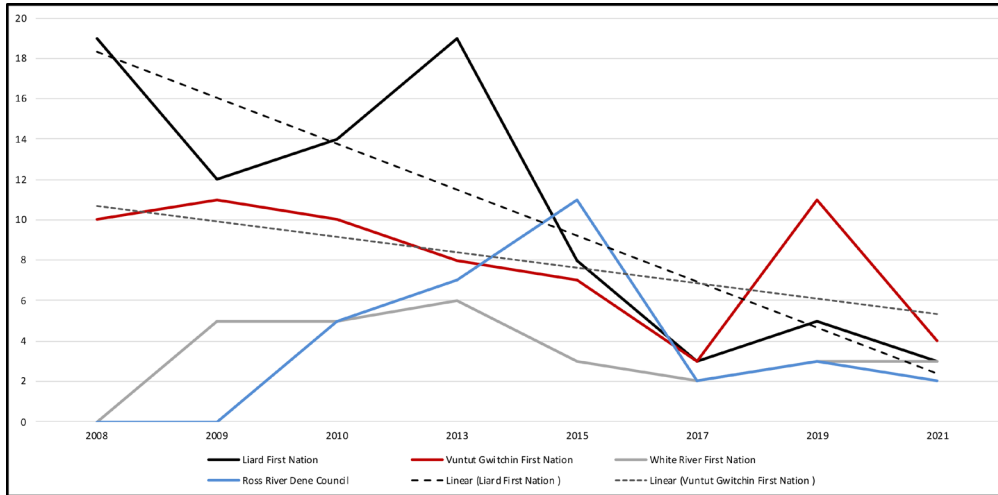


Figure 10 tracks the business activities of four smaller First Nations communities, all of whom had five or fewer businesses owned by their members in 2021. Of these four, only the Vuntut Gwitchin is a self-governing First Nation under the modern treaty; the other three First Nations continue to be governed under the Indian Act. The Liard First Nation in the Watson Lake region of southwestern Yukon has witnessed the sharpest business decline of any of the communities, dropping from highs of 19 in 2008 and 2013 down to only three firms in 2021. The Liard First Nation government itself went through a challenging time after coming under third-party management in August 2014, a period of economic hardship that ended in 2018 (Morin, 2014). The other three small First Nations shown in Figure 10 are all in remote locations, with the Vuntut Gwitchin of Old Crow being the only fly-in community in the Yukon. The Ross River Dene do not record any businesspeople in the 2008 and 2009 survey but peaked in 2015 with eleven firms before crashing down to two firms as of 2021.

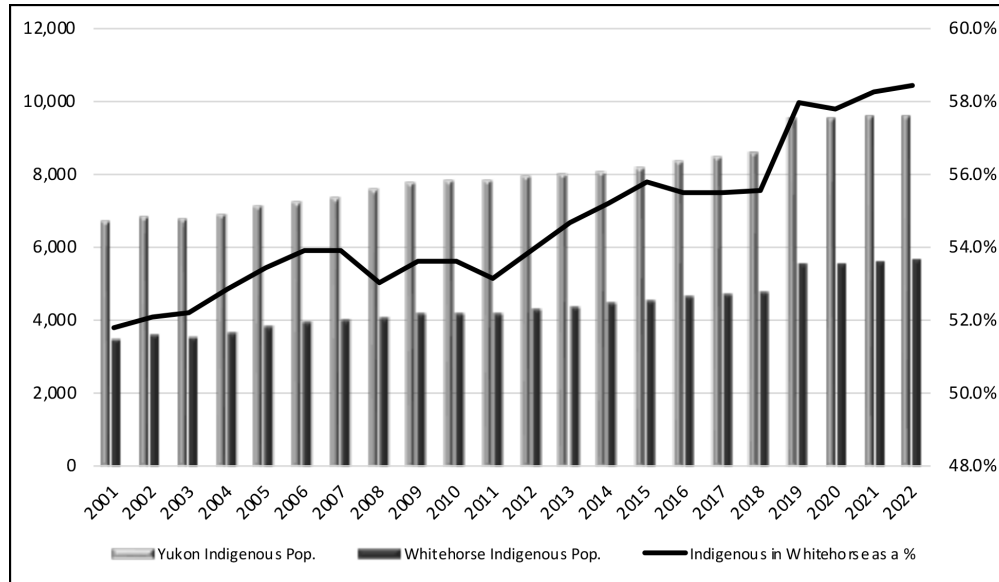
FIGURE 10  
Selected Trends in First Nations Business Activity, 2008 -2021



While twelve of the Yukon's fourteen First Nations have their traditional territories in rural Yukon, which is dominated by small and remote communities of approximately 500 people or less, the Kwanlin Dun First Nation and the Ta'an Kwach'an Council are located within the Whitehorse census area, which has a government-dominated market of 32,000 people (Yukon Bureau of Statistics, 2022a). However, these two First Nations have disproportionately small business communities. In 2017, they collectively had eighteen firms, ten for the KDFN and eight for the TKC, but their business numbers dropped quickly and in 2021 they accounted for only nine businesses: KDFN, the largest First Nation population in the Yukon, had three firms while the much smaller TKC had six.

However, while the number of First Nations-owned businesses has declined, there has been a steady increase in the number of Indigenous people living in Whitehorse (see Figure 11). This includes members of the KDFN and TKC, members of the Yukon's other twelve First Nations, and other non-Yukon First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people. Between 2001 and 2021 the Indigenous population of Whitehorse increased by 2,121 people, to a total population of 5,580. The City itself, however, grew by 12,172 residents, meaning that the percentage of the population that was Indigenous remained around the same (15.4% in 2001; 16.1% in 2021) (Yukon Bureau of Statistics, 2022b).

**FIGURE 11**  
**The Increasing Draw of Whitehorse for Indigenous Peoples**



Note. From Population Report, Q2 2022, by Yukon Bureau of Statistics, 2022 (<https://yukon.ca/en/population-report-q2-2022>).

The small number of KDFN and TKC businesses may be due to the density of non-Indigenous businesses in Whitehorse, while the higher proportion of First Nations businesses among peripheral communities may be the result of the substantial economic presence of First Nations governments and their direct relationships with local resource activity. In Whitehorse, with its long-standing government-dominated and non-Indigenous economy, local First Nations communities appear to be crowded out. Recognizing this problem, the Yukon government passed legislation to support First Nations procurement on February 22, 2021. This legislation was enacted to increase the “the ability of local businesses and First Nations to secure Government Contracts through changes in how Government procures Goods and Services” (Government of Yukon, 2023, p. 1). While future YBS will hopefully provide evidence of this policy’s success, Whitehorse-based First Nations do not currently seem to be benefiting by proximity to the Yukon’s dominant marketplace.

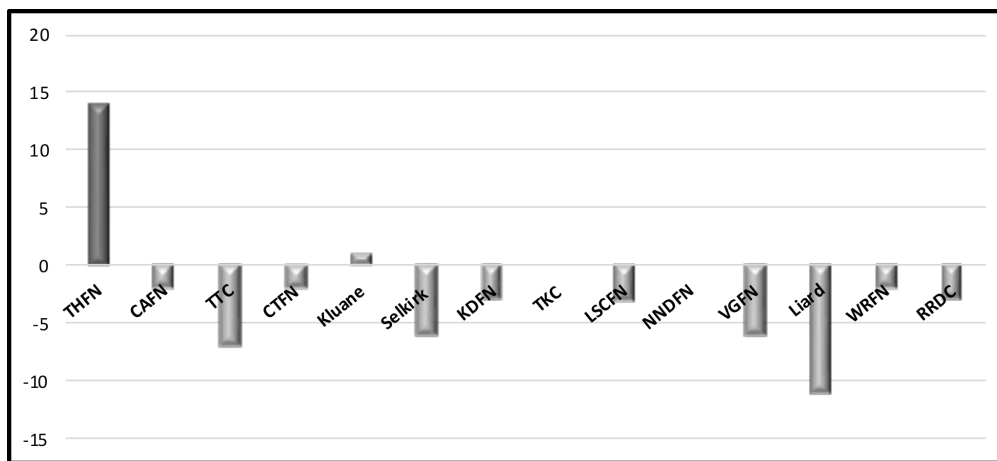
Further analysis is required to develop an understanding of how THFN and, to a lesser extent, CAFN have managed to spur entrepreneurship while the Selkirk—even with the Minto Mine on their traditional territory—experienced a decline. More insight is needed into the limited business development of the two Whitehorse First Nations and why few of their First Nation members are moving into business ownership despite living in the largest market north of 600 in Canada.

Returning to the comparison of the 2010 composition of the Yukon’s First Nations business community to the community of 2021, Figure 12 demonstrates that only



two First Nations added businesses over the eleven-year time span. The other twelve First Nations lost representation. The Liard First Nation associated with Watson Lake dropped from fourteen businesses down to only three, while the Teslin Tlingit dropped from twenty-two firms down to fifteen. Changes of this nature could be explained by business failures but could equally be the result of mergers or even business lifecycle events. What is apparent though, is that there are fewer Yukon First Nations businesses in operation in 2021 than there were in 2010. Apart from the THFN, there is either stagnation or a real decline in the presence of Yukon First Nations businesses.

**FIGURE 12**  
**Change in First Nations Business Numbers by**  
**First Nation Membership, 2010 to 2021**



### **THE YUKON BUREAU OF STATISTICS' SPECIAL REPORT ON FIRST NATIONS BUSINESSES, 2019**

The 2019 Yukon Bureau of Statistics' special report on First Nations business activity, the *Yukon Business Survey, Results by First Nation Ownership*, provides much more complex and detailed reporting on Yukon First Nations businesses, covering such topics as ownership models, industrial coding, employment, and revenue generation. Over three-quarters of all Yukon businesses employ four or fewer workers (including the owner of the firm); many are probably single-employee firms or owner-operator businesses. The comparable number for First Nations firms is not significantly different at 72.4%. First Nations firms are somewhat overrepresented in the 24-49 worker category, with 9 firms (4.6 %) in this range, compared to the total First Nations ownership of 2.2 % of all firms: this is possibly due to the presence of the First Nations development corporations in this sample. Yukon development corporations, of which there were 13 reporting in the 2019 special report, frequently have multiple business arms that may include grocery stores, construction firms, and catering companies, along with core office staff and seasonal workers in sectors such as wildfire fighting.

However, the total number for First Nations businesses in Table 1 is considerably greater than the number of First Nations firms listed in the 2019 business survey (196 businesses compared to 127). This is likely because the business survey data in Table 1 is based on Yukon sole proprietor and partnership businesses, while the special business report uses a different criterion:

**A First Nation (FN) business** is defined as a business enterprise which has at least 51 percent of ownership held by a Yukon First Nation, a Yukon First Nation Development Corporation, or individuals belonging to a Yukon First Nation (self-identification basis). (Yukon Bureau of Statistics, 2021, emphasis in original)

It appears that the difference lies in the inclusion of businesses owned by development corporations. For example, a development corporation might be run as a single entity owned by a specific First Nation, but it may have several separate operating arms, each incorporated through partnerships with non-First Nation or other First Nation firms. For example, NND-Summit Camps is a 51% First Nation-owned firm in partnership with Summit Camps, a non-First Nation firm that provides food catering and camp accommodations at the Eagle Gold mine in Dublin Gulch, Yukon. Tetra Tech Canada (an engineering firm) also has a partnership with NNDDC, as does the hotel and accommodations firm Northern Vision Development, which manages the Bedrock Hotel in Mayo (Coates, 2018).

Employment size	Total number of businesses	As a percentage	Number of FN businesses	As a percentage
1 to 4 workers	2443	75.4	142	72.4
5 to 9 workers	334	10.3	24	12.2
10 to 24 workers	233	7.2	14	7.1
25 to 49 workers	72	2.2	9	4.6
50 to 99 workers	26	0.8	2†	1.0
More than 100 workers	13	0.4	0†	0.0
Don't know/refuse to answer	121	3.7	5	2.6
<b>Totals</b>	<b>3242</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>196</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<p>Note. * Because some employees hold more than one job, multiple job holders will be counted more than once in 'Total Workers.' In addition, this total also includes any owners who actively work in their businesses. †Extrapolated by authors. From Yukon Business Survey, Results by First Nation Ownership, 2019, by Yukon Bureau of Statistics, 2021 (<a href="https://yukon.ca/en/yukon-business-survey-results-first-nation-ownership-2019">https://yukon.ca/en/yukon-business-survey-results-first-nation-ownership-2019</a>).</p>				

YBS also reported on the challenges firms were having attracting staff in the then-hot 2019 Yukon labour market. Of those businesses with vacancies in the 12-month period prior to the survey, 66.8% of total businesses reported difficulty finding staff. In comparison, 58% of First Nations businesses reported difficulty finding staff (Yukon Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Again, given the small population number of First Nations firms against the greater backdrop of thousands of businesses surveyed in the Yukon, the difference is not significant.

First Nations businesses are not overrepresented in the smaller revenue categories of less than \$50,000, representing 27.1% of all First Nations businesses compared to 29.6% for the total population (Table 2). Indeed, there is little to differentiate the Yukon First Nations business community from the total population outside the million-dollar-plus firms, where First Nations firms represent 16.8% of the total compared to 13.4% for all firms. This is possibly explained by the Yukon's 13 First Nations development corporations as well as the strong showing of First Nations businesses in construction (44 firms) and mining and quarrying (11 firms), sectors that require considerable equipment and capital.

**TABLE 2**  
**Gross Revenues by Category and Ownership, Yukon, 2018**

Revenue category	Total number of businesses	As a percentage	Number of FN businesses	As a percentage
Less than \$25,000	233	7.2	18	9.2
\$25,000 to \$50,000	729	22.4	35	17.9
\$50,000 to 100,000	620	19.1	37	18.9
\$100,000 to \$250,000	56	7.9	18	9.2
\$250,000 to \$500,000	504	15.5	26	13.3
\$500,000 to \$1,000,000	262	8.1	15	7.7
\$1,000,000 and more	436	13.4	33	16.8
Don't know, refuse, not operating	208	6.4	14	7.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>3248</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>196</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Note. From Yukon Business Survey, Results by First Nation Ownership, 2019, by Yukon Bureau of Statistics, 2021 (<https://yukon.ca/en/yukon-business-survey-results-first-nation-ownership-2019>).

While First Nations businesses are not underrepresented in employment categories or in earning categories, a pattern emerges when examining their participation in specific industrial sectors based on GDP. First Nations business activity is highly concentrated in construction, mining and quarrying, and transportation and warehousing, which accounts for 64% of all GDP earned by First Nations businesses. In the Yukon, these sectors pay well. In contrast, the GDP for the total Yukon business community is more evenly distributed, with the top-earning categories of construction, retail trade, mining and quarrying, real estate, transportation and warehousing, and accommodation and food services accounting for 68% of the total GDP. However, the absence of First Nations businesses in the retail trade sector is apparent when reviewing the 2019 business data. First Nations retail trade firms generated only \$5.8 million in GDP (4% of their total GDP) compared to \$158 million for the total Yukon (10.5%).

There is a further break in the GDP earning potential of First Nations businesses compared to the total number of Yukon firms in the service economy sector, a sector which is usually associated with higher educational requirements in the health, sciences, and education (Table 3). Here we find that First Nations firms generated only \$7.2 million (5.2%) in GDP, compared to \$202 million (13.3%) in GDP for all Yukon businesses. Finally, First Nations GDP earnings in 2019 were either too small or not reported in the categories of utilities, information and cultural industries, agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting, and arts, entertainment, and recreation. However, various First Nations development corporations are creating commercial-scale power generation for sale into the Yukon grid, with new solar projects coming online in Old Crow through the VGFN and in Beaver Creek with the Copper Niisüü Limited Partnership (Elliot, 2021; MacIntyre, 2022).

**TABLE 3**  
**Yukon GDP by Industry Sector and Ownership, 2018**

Industry sector	Sector total GDP (\$ millions)	As a percentage	GDP from FN businesses (\$ millions)	As a percentage
Agriculture, forestry, fishing & hunting	4.8	0.3	x	
Mining, quarrying, and oil & gas extraction	158.3	10.4	29.4	21.3
Utilities	49.6	3.3	..	
Construction	374	24.6	45.1	32.6
Manufacturing	20.4	1.3	4.2	3.0
Wholesale trade	52	3.4	5.4	3.9
Retail trade	158.6	10.5	5.6	4.0
Transportation & warehousing	109.4	7.2	13.7	9.9
Information & cultural industries	66.2	4.4	..	
Finance & insurance	74.3	4.9	6.9	5.0
Real estate, rental, & leasing	126.5	8.3	7.1	5.1
Professional, scientific, & technical services	79.2	5.2	2.7	2.0
Management of companies & enterprises	7.9	0.5	5.6	4.0
Administrative & support services	39.2	2.6	2.4	1.7
Educational services	2.9	0.2	x	
Health care & social assistance	55.2	3.6	1.1	0.8
Arts, entertainment, & recreation	10.4	0.7	x	
Accommodation & food services	102.8	6.8	7.8	5.6
Other services (except public admin)	25.5	1.7	1	0.7
<b>All industries</b>	<b>1517.3</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>138.3</b>	<b>99.8</b>
<p><i>Note.</i> .. = data not available, x = data suppression due to data quality or confidentiality. From <i>Yukon Business Survey, Results by First Nation Ownership, 2019, 2021</i> (<a href="https://yukon.ca/en/yukon-business-survey-results-first-nation-ownership-2019">https://yukon.ca/en/yukon-business-survey-results-first-nation-ownership-2019</a>).</p>				

Alternatively, the lack of formally documented business in the First Nations sector may be the result of definitions, specialization, and legality. Formal business development, such as incorporating a firm or developing a storefront, is not readily accessible to Indigenous entrepreneurs who are active in a community and known locally as the person to go to for small engine repair or maintenance services. Many traditional and sustainable activities—such as hunting and gathering country foods, trapping and selling furs, and processing fur trim and other materials for specialized arts and crafts—fly under the business incorporation radar but are important seasonal or annual sources of revenue within the community. These activities bring money into the local economy but may not be readily measurable by Western economic measure such as GDP.

Finally, it is important to consider the issues raised by Hernandez de Soto in his ground-breaking *The Mystery of Capital: Why Capitalism Triumphs in the West and Fails Everywhere Else* (2000). Many of the issues he raised about Third World and former Communist countries also apply for First Nations businesses, where property ownership and investment produces similar barriers to entry into Western capitalism.<sup>8</sup> Robert Bone offers similar insights into the economy of the North when he concluded that Indian Reserves, even those in agriculturally rich areas such as the Prairie North region, are not actually economic places in the Western sense of the term. He argues,

The lack of an economic foundation had proven to be the Achilles heel of the relocation “strategy.” Under normal circumstances, urban places that lose their economic function soon die, whether they are single-industry towns or rural communities. Native settlement does not follow this pattern of urban evolution because they generally have been located within cultural homelands and close to traditional hunting lands. (Bone, 2003, p. 187)

Following this line of inquiry, Tom Flanagan, Manny Jules, and their co-authors in *Beyond the Indian Act: Restoring Indigenous Property Rights* presented a Canadian case for improved access to land titles on Indian Reserves. In it, former chief Manny Jules (who promotes the First Nations Property Ownership Initiative) notes, “The Indian Act reserve system substantially reduces land value and promotes low value land use. It prevents us from accessing the equity in our lands, raises our costs of doing business and discourages investment” (Flanagan et al., 2010, p. x). It is not yet clear how these findings translate to the Yukon, where 11 of the 14 First Nations have signed modern land treaties and where First Nations should have greater access to investment capital due to their access to land and resources outside of the Indian Act. In all likelihood, it is too early to see the benefits from the land claims and self-government agreements.

Finally, it is not clear if measuring entrepreneurship by using the experience of individual firms is a culturally appropriate measure of Indigenous business acumen. Indigenous businesses have different priorities—job creation, local wealth creation, and cultural resilience—than standard Western businesses. There may be other metrics to measure Indigenous business activity than the existing Western capitalist-based survey tools.

## STATISTICS CANADA AND THE INDIGENOUS BUSINESS COMMUNITY

In 2016, the Centre for Canadian Indigenous Business (CCAB) along with the authors approached Statistics Canada with a request to assess the level of Indigenous business activity in Canada: a baseline upon which to measure the impact of policies and investment designed to enhance Indigenous entrepreneurship has been a long-sought-after goal. At the time, Statistics Canada could not supply a comprehensive response. They recognized that their existing business survey instruments did not adequately ask business owners about their Indigenous heritage. The resulting research methodology program developed at Statistics Canada using existing Statistics Canada databases, census, and administrative records and employing their in-house BANFF imputation methodology resulted in the publication *Identifying Indigenous Business Owners and Indigenous-Owned Businesses* (Gueye et al., 2022).

In this report, Statistics Canada concluded that there were only 37,000 Indigenous owned businesses in Canada out of a total of 2,537,000 private businesses nationwide (both incorporated and unincorporated) as of 2018 (see Table 4). Gueye et al.'s paper considers two definitions of an Indigenous-owned business. The first, Gueye-Lafrance-Oyarzun 1 (GLO1), is based on the presence of at least one owner who identifies as an Indigenous person. The second and more common definition, Gueye-Lafrance-Oyarzun 2 (GLO2), is based on majority ownership (51%). The second model considers a business to be Indigenous owned if more than half of the shares are held by individuals who identify with that group and draws on the method used by Grekou et al. (2018) to measure business ownership by gender. The authors note that GLO1 identifies the extent to which Indigenous people are involved in business ownership. In contrast, their GLO2 methodology allows for comparison with other sources and is consistent with the definition of an Indigenous-owned business outlined in a report commissioned by the National Aboriginal Capital Corporations Association (NACCA) (National Indigenous Economic Development Board, 2015). NACCA found that the definition based on majority ownership is consistent with definitions of an Indigenous-owned business used elsewhere in Canada, as well as Australia and Hawaii (Gueye et al., 2022).

**TABLE 4**  
**Distribution of Private Businesses by Indigenous Identity of  
Owners and Presence of Employees (2018)**

<b>Identity</b>	<b>Without employees</b>	<b>As a percentage</b>	<b>Employer business</b>	<b>As a percentage</b>	<b>Total</b>
Non-Indigenous	1,664,200	66.6	835,800	33.4	2,499,900
Indigenous	25,100	67.8	11,900	32.2	37,001
First Nations	12,000	9.0	5,400	31.0	17,401
Metis	11,900	68.0	5,600	32.0	17,501
Inuk (Inuit)	400	66.7	200	33.3	601
Other Indigenous	900	56.3	700	43.8	1,601
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,689,300</b>	<b>66.6</b>	<b>847,700</b>	<b>33.4</b>	<b>2,537,001</b>

Note. “Other Indigenous ownership” refers to businesses belonging to individuals with multiple Indigenous identities or jointly owned by individuals who identify with one of the three Indigenous groups but where no one group controls more than 50 percent of the shares. Numbers may not add to total due to rounding. “Private businesses” refers to Canadian-controlled private corporations and unincorporated businesses for which gender, Indigenous identity and age of ownership, province and employment size can be defined. From *Identifying Indigenous Business Owners and Indigenous-Owned Businesses* by B. Gueye, A. Lafrance-Cooke, and J. Oyarzun, 2022, (Catalogue No. 11-633-X), Statistics Canada, (<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/11-633-x/11-633-x2022008-eng.pdf?st=aVwK82mN>)

Gueye et al.’s (2022) study notes that businesses owned by individuals with multiple Indigenous identities or jointly owned by individuals who identify with one of the three Indigenous groups—but where no one group controls more than 50% of the shares—accounted for the remaining 4.3% or some 1600 firms (Table 4). Like non-Indigenous businesses, two-thirds of Indigenous-owned businesses did not have employees, suggesting they are more self-employed persons than employers. Gueye et al. suggest that the three communities that make up Indigenous Canada (Inuit, First Nations, and Métis) should not be considered as one homogenous group in terms of business ownership. Comparing the 2018 Indigenous business data to the Indigenous Census of Canada, 2016 population returns that show that Inuit and First Nations business owners are severely underrepresented while businesspeople of Métis heritage, while still underrepresented proportionately to their population size, dominate the Indigenous profile with more businesses in total than First Nations business-owners (17,500 compared to 17,400). The comparative strength of the Métis business community vis-à-vis the First Nations’ is apparent given that the Métis population in Canada totals some 390,000 fewer members than the First Nations as of 2016 (although this number is increasingly rapidly due to the registration efforts of the provincial Métis organizations).



Table 5 demonstrates the level of underrepresentation occurring within the Indigenous business community: the 2016 Indigenous population is used to determine the expected participation rate and is contrasted with the percentage of Indigenous businesses. The logic here is that, assuming all things are equal or equitable, the percentage of businesses in Canada that are Indigenous owned (First Nations, Métis, or Inuit) should be proportional to their percentage of the population. This is clearly not the case. For example, since Indigenous peoples comprise 4.73% of the Canadian population, there should be approximately 120,000 Indigenous businesses, not 37,000. The level of inequality is most apparent with the First Nations population, which should total 74,000 firms, not 17,400. Likewise, the Inuit totals should include 4,800 businesses, not 600.<sup>9</sup> Explanations for this ongoing inequality abound: late entry into the Western economy, remote community locations, limited educational outcomes, limited access to capital, and, for First Nations, the complications of being on-reserve. The gaps, however, are greater than these factors would suggest.

**TABLE 5**  
**Proportional Distribution of Private Businesses in Canada by**  
**Indigenous Identity of Owners and Presence of Employees (2018) \***

Identity	Total businesses	As a percent of all businesses (observed)	Census population 2016 †	As a percent of population 2016 (expected)
Non-Indigenous	2,499,900	98.54	32,786,285	95.14
Indigenous	37,000	1.46	1,629,800	4.73
First Nations	17,400	0.69	977,235	2.84
Métis	17,500	0.69	587,545	1.71
Inuk (Inuit)	600	0.02	65,030	0.19
Other Indigenous	1,800	0.07	NA	NA
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,537,000</b>		<b>34,460,060</b>	

Note. \*“Other Indigenous ownership” refers to businesses belonging to individuals with multiple Indigenous identities or jointly owned by individuals who identify with one of the three Indigenous groups but where no one group controls more than 50 percent of the shares. Numbers may not add to total due to rounding. “Private businesses” refers to Canadian-controlled private corporations and unincorporated businesses for which gender, Indigenous identity and age of ownership, province and employment size can be defined. Observed and Expected added by the authors. † From *Indigenous Population Profile*, by Statistics Canada, 2018, Catalogue No. 98-510-X2016001 (<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/abpopprof/index.cfm?Lang=E>).

## INDIGENOUS SELF-EMPLOYMENT, CENSUS OF CANADA

While the voluntary National Household Survey (NHS) that replaced the mandatory long-form census in 2011 had numerous shortcomings, it did finally include a question on self-employment under class of worker. By applying Statistics Canada’s Indigenous population profiles, it is possible to break out Indigenous self-employment levels for 2011, which fall between two of the YBS business survey populations (2010 and 2013). The results indicate considerable underrepresentation of Indigenous businesspeople in the ranks of the self-employed in 2011, with a non-Indigenous self-employment rate in the Yukon of 13% compared to an Indigenous rate of 5.8%. The 2016 Aboriginal Census of Canada demonstrates little change, with the corresponding self-employment levels being 13.2% and 6.4%. Overall, in 2016, self-employed workers of non-Aboriginal heritage represented 88.6% of the self-employed in the Yukon, with First Nations standing at 8.6% and with Métis and multiple Aboriginal origins comprising the remainder of this employment group (Statistics Canada, 2018).<sup>10</sup> Finally, the recently released Indigenous population profile for 2021 shows that the national 40% growth in Indigenous self-employment between 2011 and 2016 appears to be a sustaining trend, with the 2021 census data showing another jump in Indigenous self-employment by, again, 40%. In contrast, non-Indigenous self-employment grew by 13.3% between 2011 and 2016, increasing to 23.5% in the pandemic year 2021 (see Table 6).

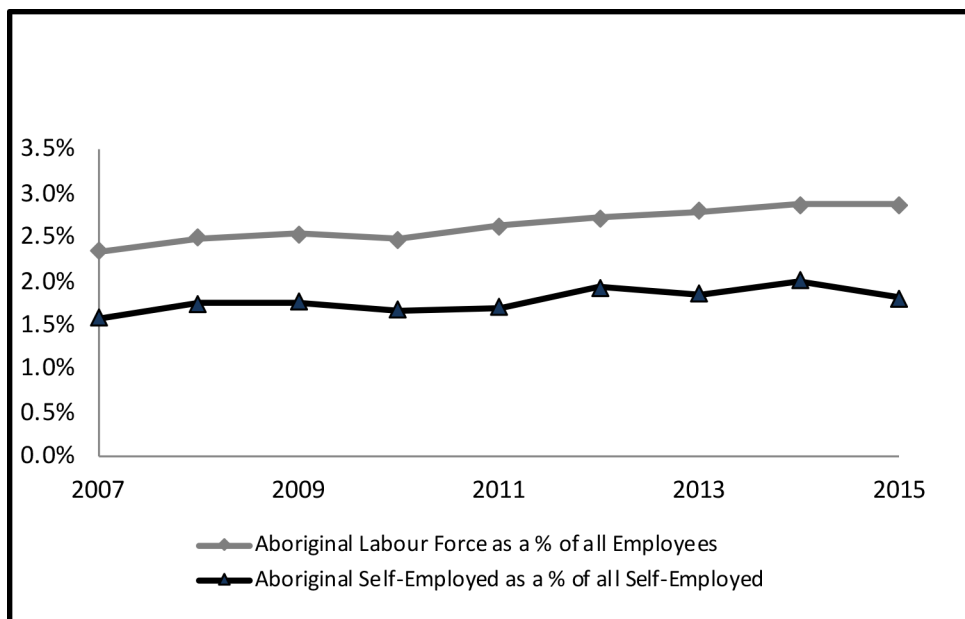
**TABLE 6**  
**Growth in Indigenous Self-Employment, Canada 2011-2021**

Census year	Total self-employed	Change	Percentage change
2011	38,655		
2016	54,255	15,600	40.4
2021	75,845	21,590	39.8
<b>Non-Indigenous</b>			
2011	1,888,335		
2016	2,140,180	251,845	13.3
2021	2,644,185	504,005	23.5
<p>Note. From NHS Aboriginal Profile, 2011 by Statistics Canada, 2013, Catalogue No. 99-011-XWE2011007 (<a href="http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/aprof/index.cfm?Lang=E">http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/aprof/index.cfm?Lang=E</a>); Aboriginal Population Profile, 2016 Census by Statistics Canada, 2018, Catalogue No. 98-510-X2016001 (<a href="http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/abpopprof/index.cfm?Lang=E">http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/abpopprof/index.cfm?Lang=E</a>); and Indigenous Population Profile, 2021 Census of Population by Statistics Canada, 20203, Catalogue No. 98-510-X2021001 (<a href="https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/ipp-ppa/index.cfm?Lang=E">https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/ipp-ppa/index.cfm?Lang=E</a>).</p>			

It has been suggested that the jump in Indigenous self-employment in Canada between 2016 and 2021 was the response to the pandemic. However, transitioning that quickly in response to pandemic layoffs seems unlikely, as starting a business takes time, planning, and financial—as well as familial—support. Given the stress and insecurity the COVID-19 pandemic created across society, this seems an unlikely response. The 2021 self-employment numbers mirror the increase in Indigenous self-employment demonstrated in the previous census, suggesting that this 40% growth rate is a viable measure of a renewed Indigenous entrepreneurial spirit.

Canada's flagship Labour Force Survey also breaks out self-employment for non-Indigenous and Indigenous (off-reserve) employees for Canada and the provinces. Figure 13 shows Indigenous employees as a percentage of all employees and as a percentage of those employees who were self-employed, 2007 to 2015 in an off-reserve setting.<sup>11</sup> Indigenous employment as a percentage of all employees grew steadily from 2007 to 2015, rising from 330,000 to 434,200 or from 2.3% of the employed labour force to 2.9%. In contrast, Indigenous self-employment never represented more than 2% of all self-employed workers, ranging from 1.6% in 2007 to 1.8% in 2015. In total, the number of Indigenous self-employed people was 40,600 in 2007, peaking at 54,200 in 2014 before falling off to 49,500 in 2015. During this period Indigenous employment

FIGURE 13  
Aboriginal Self-Employment in Canada, LFS 2006-2015



Note. From Table 14-10-0369-01 Archived-Labour Force Survey Estimates (LFS), Employment by Aboriginal Group, National Occupational Classification for Statistics (NOC-S) and Age Group, Canada, Selected Provinces and Regions (x 1,000) by Statistics Canada, 2017 (<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tb11/en/tv.action?pid=1410036901>)

in Canada grew by 34.6% while Indigenous self-employment grew by 33.5%, slightly off the pace of total employment growth, meaning that self-employment Indigenous workers continued to be underrepresented. In the Yukon, the 2015 Employment Annual Review, based on the territorial LFS, found that out of 3,400 workers, 300 Indigenous workers were self-employed, which supports the underrepresentation found in other sources.

The 2011 NHS reported that the Yukon had a self-employed working population representing 12.5% of all classes of workers in the labour force or 2,650 out of 21,250 total workers, slightly higher than the 11% registered nationally. However, the NHS Indigenous Profile for Yukon only shows 220 self-employed Indigenous workers out of a base of 2,650, or a rate of 8.3%. Custom tabulation shows that of the 220 self-employed workers, 190 were of First Nations heritage. The resulting self-employment rate for First Nations, then, was 7.2% in 2011. The Yukon rate for self-employment slightly exceeded the national rate for First Nations people, which sat at 7% in 2011.<sup>12</sup> In 2010, the YBS captured 149 First Nations businesses in the Yukon, one year before the National Household data was collected. Of course, not all self-employed workers register as a business with the corporate registry system, which partially explains the difference between the NHS data and the YBS, which draws its population from the Yukon Business Registry.

By 2016, the rate of self-employment in the Yukon stood at 11.9% based on 2,595 self-employed workers in a labour force of 21,795, which is slightly less than in 2011. The self-employment sector lost workers since 2011, while the Yukon labour force grew by 545 workers (Census of Canada, Yukon 2016). In 2016, self-employment among First Nations workers stood at 225 workers, demonstrating a 15.6% growth in self-employed First Nations workers over the five-year period. The 2016 census data sits directly between the 2015 and the 2017 YBS and shows 151 First Nations firms in the Yukon in 2015, dropping to 121 in 2017.

By 2021 self-employment for Indigenous people in the Yukon stood at only 10.1%, indicating a decline from 2011 to 2021. And, while the Yukon rate for Indigenous self-employment was slightly higher than the national rate, it was still below the rate of self-employment for non-Indigenous workers, which stood at 14.3%—the same as the national rate. In 2021, only 295 of the 445 self-employed Indigenous workers declared as First Nations, with 110 declaring as Métis. The YBS for 2021 found there were 156 First Nations businesses in the Territory, considerably less than the census self-employment count (and which did not include questions on the Métis status of business owners). The number of self-employed First Nations people in the Yukon has been growing in absolute numbers: from 2011-2016, the number of self-employed First Nations people in the Yukon grew from 220 to 225, topping out at 295 people in 2021. As a percentage of the labour force, First Nations self-employment grew from 6.8% in 2016 to 9.1% of all First Nations workers in 2021.

Ultimately, the Census and the YBS are two different surveys managed by two different organizations, asking different questions around the same topic of First Nations business activity. One is a census instrument for Canada, the other an administrative survey built from the Yukon business registry. The difference between the higher census

counts and the business survey counts includes unregistered firms in the Yukon, with employees probably working part-time and possibly having mixed incomes from wage economy work supplemented by self-employment. YBS is also a voluntary survey: regardless of how diligent survey staff may be in requesting participation, respondents may refuse to participate. In contrast, the Canadian Census is mandatory and carries penalties for non-participation (Statistics Canada, 2024a).

## **SELF-EMPLOYED FIRST NATIONS WORKERS IN THE TERRITORIES**

The small population of self-employed workers in the Territories impacts the researchers' ability to clearly define the segmentation of the self-employed First Nations worker population without aggregation. As a result, this section aggregates the three territories, creating a larger population to better understand the sectors of the economy self-employed First Nations workers are active in. The section is dominated by the Yukon and Northwest Territories, as the Nunavut self-employed Inuit population is only 300, with only 10 of those listed as self-employed. In this case, a special census tabulation of the 2011 Census/NHS products provides the information on First Nations workers (Statistics Canada, 2011).<sup>13</sup> In the Territories, self-employed First Nations workers are again underrepresented compared to non-Indigenous workers. Self-employed First Nations workers in the Territories represent 4.6% of the labour force, compared to 9.5% for non-Indigenous workers.

Across Canada, the three combined territories represent the only instance of relatively equal representation in management occupations, which are typically dominated by non-Indigenous workers: 26.9% of First Nations workers are in management occupations, compared to 24.7% of non-Indigenous workers. This may be attributed to the strong performance of First Nations Development Corporations in both the Yukon and the Northwest Territories, where mining, oil, and gas corporations have been signing Comprehensive Benefit Agreements with First Nations groups (Forrest, 2016).<sup>14</sup> An additional factor in the increasing number of management opportunities in First Nations-owned businesses may be the self-governing status of 11 of the 14 First Nations in the Yukon.

That said, self-employed First Nations workers continue to be underrepresented in business, natural sciences, and health. They are also underrepresented in education, law, and government, as well as arts and culture, which runs counter to the national trend (Finnegan & Djokic, 2017). Self-employed First Nations workers, however, continue to be overrepresented in the lower-paying sales and services occupations and in resources and agriculture production (primarily forestry, fishing, and hunting, not farming). Self-employed First Nations workers are also underrepresented in the generally well-paying northern trades, transportation, and equipment operator sectors, which, given the strong mining sector in the Territories and the demand for trucking goods north, runs counter to the national rates: nationally, 19.2% of workers in these sectors are self-employed First Nations workers, compared to 17.4% of all self-employed workers in Canada (see Figure 14).

**FIGURE 14**  
**Comparison of First Nations Ancestry in Self-Employed Workers**  
**to Non-Indigenous Self-Employed Workers, Territories, 2011**

	<b>Self-Employed First Nations (NAI) Ancestry</b>	<b>Self-Employed non-Indigenous Ancestry only</b>
All occupations	4.6%	9.5%
0 Management	26.9%	24.7%
1 Business; finance & admin.	5.8%	10.2%
2 Natural & applied sciences	4.8%	6.7%
3 Health occupations	1.9%	5.3%
4 Education; law gov't.	5.8%	8.9%
5 Art; culture; recreation & sport	15.4%	8.0%
6 Sales and service	12.5%	10.5%
7 Trades; transport & equipment	19.2%	23.6%
8 Resources; agro & production	5.8%	1.4%
9 Manufacturing and utilities	1.9%	0.9%
<i>Note:</i> Detailed data is not publicly available through the Statistics Canada website, resulting in the use of 2011 data and not the more recent 2016 or 2021 census data.		

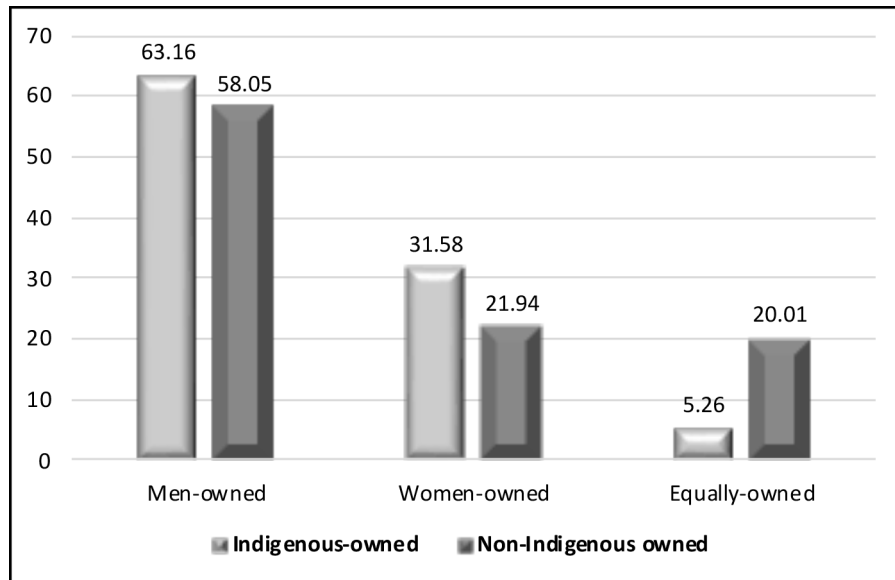
## DATA LIMITATIONS

The YBS reports do not publish breakouts of female and male ownership, although the data does exist. The custom tabulation of the Aboriginal census profile for the Yukon in 2011, referenced in Figure 15, breaks out self-employment by sex and shows a split of 63% male and 37% female for the total population. More recently, in their 2022 assessment of the level of Indigenous business in Canada Statistics Canada found that

In Canada, about 71.8 percent and 24.7 percent of Indigenous-owned businesses are owned by men and women, respectively. In the territories, the distribution is, while still male dominated, is more balanced at 63.2 percent are men-owned and 31.6 percent women-owned. The remaining shares are equally owned by women and men. (S. Karmali, personal communication, March 13, 2023)

The data also indicates that Indigenous women are more likely to participate in business ownership in the Territories than in southern Canada (Figure 15). Furthermore, Indigenous women at a national scale represent just under 25% of all Indigenous business owners, while non-Indigenous women represent only 20.6% of all non-Indigenous owners (Gueye et al., 2022).

FIGURE 15  
Private Enterprises by Sex and Indigenous Identity of Ownership, 2018



The YBS reports address neither the sex of First Nations business owners nor the continuity of ownership year-to-year. As collected, the data includes the year of business incorporation—and from that the years in business can be calculated—but they do not report on the ownership indicator. As such, when the change in business activity by First Nations membership is plotted, it is not possible to determine if the firms are surviving businesses from 2008: the data shows constant turnover from reference period to reference period.

Nor do the databases explored in this research explore the shadow economy, be it informal, grey, black, or underground. As noted in a publication prepared for Justice Canada,

Hidden beneath the **formal economy** (economic activity that is taxed and monitored by government and used for national calculations of gross national product [GNP]) are a mass of transactions both monetary and otherwise which go unaccounted for. As a whole, these untaxed and unregulated activities are large enough to be considered an economy of their own, albeit an illegal one. (Draeger, 2015, p.4, emphasis in original)

## CONCLUSION

Statistics Canada's January 2023 report appears to offer a rosy view of the future: Indigenous majority-owned businesses are very optimistic (37.2%) or somewhat optimistic (33.1%) of the future outlook over the next 12 months, and private-sector businesses as a whole are also very optimistic (22%) and somewhat optimistic (47.9%)

(Statistics Canada, 2023a). However, while these Indigenous survey respondents are optimistic, Indigenous people are still seriously underrepresented in Canadian and Yukon businesses. Maggie Walter wants to set a new agenda for Indigenous statistics that allows research to move past the five Ds of “disparities, deprivation, disadvantage, dysfunction, and difference” (Taylor & Kukutai, 2016, p. 80). This is a meaningful discussion and a commendable approach. However, without statistical baselines that clearly demonstrate the inequalities that exist—the “d” of disparities/disadvantage—it is difficult to develop meaningful local and national policies such as First Nations procurement programs, innovative business management courses, and financing support systems that enable more Indigenous businesses to get started and for entrepreneurial individuals to make the jump from employee to employer.

This study has demonstrated how three different government sources provide slightly different yet equally revealing disparities between the First Nations and Indigenous business communities and the rest of Canada. Indigenous business communities are underrepresented in the national registry for Indigenous businesses released by Statistics Canada in 2022, the 2011 and 2016 census records, and the eight-cycle YBS record.<sup>15</sup> One would expect that the Yukon, with its level of First Nations self-government, would be well advanced in the development of a strong and growing First Nations business culture. However, based on the number of businesses owned by Yukon First Nations businesspeople it appears this is not the case. If anything, the trend appears to be downward, with First Nations businesses peaking in 2013 at 211 and having declined since, dropping to 121 local Yukon First Nations businesses in 2021. This is, of course, only one measure of growth and stability and does not speak to such issues as size, profitability, and return on investment. Perhaps these 121 businesses in 2021 are employing more workers than those in 2013, perhaps they have greater revenues—but at this point, accessible data does not provide the answers. A research report by the Bank of Canada recommends that developing a register of Indigenous-owned businesses in Canada would support research in this area (Chernoff & Cheung, 2023). It is worrisome, however, that data from eight separate business survey cycles indicates that a considerable disparity exists between First Nations and non-Indigenous business communities in the Yukon, a disparity that it is probably worsening rather than improving.

This study stresses the importance of creating a baseline to understand the state of the First Nations business environment. If we accept that Indigenous businesses are severely underrepresented in Canada, then it follows that far more research on entrepreneurship among Yukon First Nations businesspeople is required. The momentum that should be driving new First Nations business development in the Yukon is being captured by First Nations businesspeople from outside the Territory. As such, it is necessary to clarify the barriers to First Nations businesses entering and prospering in the Yukon marketplace. This future research agenda needs to look at specific aspects of Yukon First Nations entrepreneurship including, but not be limited, to:

- The availability of capital and credit,
- The nature and extent of female First Nations entrepreneurship,



- The access to education, especially business training and related skill sets,
- The work and employment histories of entrepreneurs,
- The need for an expanded First Nations-oriented business skills program at Yukon University,
- The attitudes towards entrepreneurship within Yukon First Nations families and communities,
- The need for capacity building and acknowledgment of competition for talent between First Nations and public governments,
- The accessibility of northern markets and recognition of regional development challenges,
- The study of government procurement policies, which are only now taking hold,
- The nature of CBA/IBAs that may favour Aboriginal Economic Development Corporations over local entrepreneurs,
- The existence and nature of First Nations Development Corporations, and
- The role of First Nations Governments in supporting business enterprises.

The development of Yukon and national datasets outlining the state of Indigenous business in Canada clearly shows that, regardless of the importance that researchers and politicians attribute to the Indigenous economy in Canada, Indigenous businesspeople are significantly underrepresented.

## END NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The number of Indigenous businesses in Canada ranges widely. Two recent estimates are 60,000 (Jackobsh & Boskov, 2020) and 50,000 (Moore & Robinson, 2022).
- <sup>2</sup> The CEO of the Nacho Nyäk Dun Development Corporation (NNDDC) experienced these and many other delays operating in Mayo, Yukon, where the company's many assets were often compromised by limited emergency services that affected things as varied as building inspections, refrigerator repairs, internet service, plumbing, electricity, and fire extinguishers. Typically, these products and services had to come from Dawson City, Whitehorse, or Edmonton. The freon examples comes from Greg Finnegan's experience with NNDDC.
- <sup>3</sup> First Nations on-reserve populations are excluded from the monthly Labour Force Survey conducted by Statistics Canada. This exclusion has existed from the survey's start in 1945.
- <sup>4</sup> See p 201, Canada Council of Aboriginal Business, 2016, *Promise and Prosperity: The Aboriginal Business Survey*.
- <sup>5</sup> For example, in 2020 the NNDDC, under the umbrella of the Development Corporation, owned a 51% interest in numerous businesses in engineering, catering, mining equipment leasing, hotels, and airplane leasing (owned 50/50 with another First Nation) and had full ownership of a grocery store and mineral exploration firm, among other investments and business interests.
- <sup>6</sup> While 2008 and 2009 were the first years the survey was run with First Nations data requests, we selected 2010 for illustration because it included all fourteen First Nations, whereas 2008 and 2009 may have had gaps in representation, especially in Ross River and White River First Nation, which are rather isolated First Nations.
- <sup>7</sup> Greg Finnegan, co-author and Chief Statistician from 2007-2011, introduced the First Nations questions along with other changes to the YBS in 2008.
- <sup>8</sup> See also "Native Title: Dead Capital?" by R. Edwards, 2003, *Singapore Journal of Legal Studies*, pp. 80-105, who offers a perspective similar to de Soto's in regards to Indigenous lands in Australia.
- <sup>9</sup> As Gueye, Lafrance-Cooke and Oyarzun (2022) note in *Identifying Indigenous business owners and Indigenous-owned businesses*, "numbers may not add to total due to rounding" (p. 13). As such, these expected values are approximations.
- <sup>10</sup> The 2011 and 2016 Census of Canada and the Labour Force Survey data used in this section uses the term Aboriginal not Indigenous.
- <sup>11</sup> This is a discontinued data series that has been archived by Statistics Canada. A request for an update on this data series was made but without success.
- <sup>12</sup> We have considerable concerns over the aggregation of self-employment in small communities because of random rounding. If a community has 100 employed people and 5 are listed as self-employed this is a 5% self-employment rate, yet due to random rounding this could actually be zero or ten. Accumulated errors may be inflating or deflating the self-employment rate at this scale.
- <sup>13</sup> A custom tabulation using the following variables: Aboriginal identity (11), Area of residence (3), Highest certificate, diploma or degree (10), Class of worker (5), Selected characteristics (204) and Adjusted base for incompletely enumerated reserves 2006-2011 for the population aged 15 years and over in private households of Canada, provinces and territories, and of selected regions (2)
- <sup>14</sup> Comprehensive Benefit Agreements are also commonly referred to as Impact Benefit Agreements.
- <sup>15</sup> In the 2011 and 2016 census records, self-employment was used as a proxy for being in business.

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