

Self-Employment Trends Among First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (2001–2021)

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ABSTRACT

This article explores self-employment trends among Indigenous Peoples in Canada between 2001 and 2021, focusing on 2016 onward. Using disaggregated data (i.e., data separated by First Nations, Métis, and Inuit identity) from Statistics Canada’s Census of Population, it examines changes in both self-employment rates and absolute numbers, revealing distinct patterns across Indigenous groups. The analysis finds that while Métis individuals consistently report the highest self-employment rates, First Nations, despite notable growth, continue to face structural barriers, particularly those imposed by the Indian Act. Inuit remain significantly underrepresented in self-employment. The article also draws attention to the underutilization of external business assistance: in 2017, 88% of self-employed First Nations, 72% of self-employed Inuit, and 91% of self-employed Métis reported receiving no outside support. These findings underscore the importance of disaggregated data and call for targeted funding models that reflect the diverse conditions shaping Indigenous self-employment in Canada.

Self-employment has long played an important role in Canada’s economy, offering an alternative to wage employment while fostering innovation, resilience, and local economic growth. For Indigenous Peoples, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit, self-employment also represents a pathway to economic independence, cultural continuity, and strengthened community economies (Tamtik, 2020). Understanding trends in Indigenous self-employment and the impact of access to capital, such as NACCA loan distributions, is essential for informing public policy and shaping support programs to reduce persistent economic disparities (Fortin-Lefebvre & Baba, 2020).

Indigenous Peoples in Canada have historically encountered structural barriers to full participation in the economy, including limited access to financing, education, and commercial infrastructure (Penner, 2022). Despite these constraints, the number of Indigenous entrepreneurs has grown over the past two decades, both in rates of self-employment and levels of formal business ownership (Gueye, 2024). While much of the existing literature focuses on community-owned enterprises and the broader theorizing of Indigenous economic development (Colbourne et al., 2023; Henriques et al., 2020), the self-employment experiences of individual Indigenous people remain largely understudied. Advancing this line of research requires disaggregated data that distinguish between First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples, as each group faces unique historical, policy, and market conditions that shape their entrepreneurial opportunities. In this article, I use Statistics Canada’s self-employment data as a proxy for individual-level entrepreneurship. While self-employment is a practical statistical measure, it does not capture all forms of entrepreneurship identified in the literature, such as informal business activity or innovation-driven enterprise. However, this approach is consistent with existing national datasets and allows for longitudinal and group-based comparisons.

This article examines trends in Indigenous self-employment and business ownership from 2001 to 2021, with particular attention to changes since 2016. Using census data from Statistics Canada and comparative findings from administrative business data, it presents a descriptive analysis of both self-employment rates and absolute counts. The analysis also explores access to capital, underutilization of external support, and these patterns’ implications for future economic development policy and Indigenous-led funding models.

Data Source and Methodology

Data for this analysis were sourced from Statistics Canada’s Indigenous Population Profile, drawn from the 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016, and 2021 Censuses of Population. The 2011 data come from the voluntary National Household Survey rather than a mandatory Census, which may affect comparability, but the results remain the official Statistics Canada source for that year. The self-employment figures reflect individual-level reporting of worker status class for First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and non-Indigenous populations. This approach differs from Gueye’s (2024) Indigenous-Owned Businesses in Canada, 2005 to 2021 Statistics Canada report, which draws on data from Canadian Employer–Employee Dynamics Database (CEEDD) studies, which identify Indigenous business ownership through administrative tax records and imputation and focuses on business entities rather than individuals. The use of census data enables consistent trend analysis over time and captures socio-economic shifts, including those related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Trends Analysis

Indigenous Population Trends

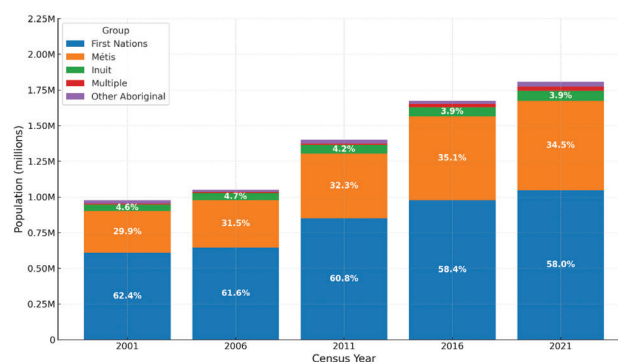
Understanding self-employment trends among Indigenous Peoples requires situating

them within the broader demographic context. As shown in Figure 1, First Nations people have consistently comprised the majority of the Indigenous population in Canada over the past two decades, accounting for approximately 58% in 2021. At 34.5%, Métis represent the second-largest group, while Inuit remain the smallest group at around 3.9%. These proportions have remained relatively stable across census years, though all three populations have experienced absolute growth.

Between 2001 and 2021, the Indigenous population in Canada grew at a faster rate than the non-Indigenous population (Statistics Canada, 2001b; Statistics Canada, n.d.). This growth affects labour force participation, service demand, and entrepreneurial activity, highlighting the need to analyze First Nations, Métis, and Inuit populations separately. For example, First Nations and Inuit communities often face greater challenges in health, education, and employment outcomes, including significantly lower postsecondary attainment (45.3% and 33.6%, respectively, compared to 56.3% among Métis and 68.0% among non Indigenous people) (Melvin, 2023). Employment outcomes show a similar divergence: while the overall Indigenous employment rate sits around 50%, a 7-point gap relative to 57% among non-Indigenous Canadians, First Nations on reserve experience a much wider gap, with employment rates nearly 20% lower, whereas Métis participation rates exceed those of non Indigenous people (NIEDB, 2024).

Interpreting self-employment data requires considering both absolute numbers and population proportions. An increase in the total number of Indigenous entrepreneurs is an important achievement, yet if it occurs alongside rapid population growth, it may not translate into a higher self-employment rate. In other words, rates can remain stable, or even appear stagnant, even when more individuals are entering self-employment. Figure 1 provides a foundation for understanding how both population size and the composition of the Indigenous population by identity group shape the interpretation of Indigenous economic participation, a theme explored further in the paper.

FIGURE 1
Indigenous Population by Group (2001-2021)



Note. Chart data are from Statistics Canada (2001a; 2003, 2006; 2011; 2016; 2021).

Breakdown by Group

First Nations. As the largest Indigenous group in Canada, First Nations people make up approximately 58% of the total Indigenous population. Despite their demographic weight, First Nations have consistently reported lower self-employment rates compared to Métis and the non-Indigenous population. The self-employment rate for First Nations was 5.6% in 2001, 6.2% in 2006, 6.7% in 2011, 6.1% in 2016, and 8.0% in 2021. In absolute terms, this represented 12,625 entrepreneurs in 2001, 15,254 in 2006, 19,235 in 2011, 22,455 in 2016, and 33,920 in 2021. Despite this growth, rates remained well below the national average throughout the period. This persistent gap likely reflects historical and ongoing systemic barriers tied to the Indian Act, including limited access to capital, education, and business infrastructure, particularly for individuals living on reserve (Pinto & Blue, 2017).

Métis. Métis people account for approximately 34.5% of the Indigenous population in Canada, making them the second-largest group after First Nations. They consistently report the highest self-employment rates among Indigenous groups. The Métis self-employment rate was 8.9% in 2001, 9.3% in 2006, 12.6% in 2011, 9.6% in 2016, and 11.7% in 2021. Métis entrepreneurs numbered 12,700 in 2001, 16,905 in 2006, 21,605 in 2011, 28,880 in 2016, and 37,615 in 2021. This trend may reflect comparatively greater urban residence and increased engagement in high school completion, despite Métis being less likely to access capital through Indigenous federal funding (Big River Analytics, 2025; Layton, 2025).

Unlike First Nations people, who are subject to the Indian Act with limitations on land use, taxation, and access to capital, Métis individuals are not constrained by these statutory restrictions, reducing structural barriers to business formation and growth. In addition, Métis entrepreneurs contribute disproportionately to Indigenous economic output, accounting for nearly 44% of total Indigenous GDP, despite representing only about 35% of the Indigenous population (Chernoff & Chung, 2023). This economic prominence may help explain why Métis communities consistently report higher rates of self-employment than First Nations and Inuit groups, even when adjusting for population size.

Inuit. Inuit represent approximately 3.9% of the total Indigenous population in Canada, making them the smallest of the three constitutionally recognized groups. Among Inuit, the self-employment rate was 4.7% in 2001, 3.4% in 2006, 4.4% in 2011, 3.9% in 2016, and 4.0% in 2021. This equated to 815 Inuit entrepreneurs in 2001, 630 in 2006, 770 in 2011, 980 in 2016, and 1,095 in 2021. Inuit rates and absolute numbers remained comparatively low and stable over time. This relatively flat trend contrasts with the gradual upward movement among First Nations and Métis populations.

The lower self-employment rate among Inuit likely reflects structural barriers shaped by the geographic and socioeconomic realities of northern communities. Remoteness, extreme climate conditions, and limited transportation infrastructure contribute to high costs of living and doing business, while small local markets and constrained economic opportunities reduce the viability of traditional entrepreneurship. Research on Inuit social determinants highlights how these geographic and structural conditions, such

as isolation, high costs, and underdeveloped infrastructure, affect multiple aspects of life in Inuit Nunangat, and these same factors create unique economic challenges that generalized business supports do not fully address (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2014).

Overall Indigenous Self-Employment Trends

From 2001 to 2021, the self-employment rate among the Indigenous population rose from 7.2% to 9.9%, narrowing the long-standing gap with the non-Indigenous population, which increased from 11.7% to 14.1% over the same period (as depicted in Table 1). In the Census, the self-employment rate refers to the proportion of the employed population (wage employees plus self-employed) aged 15 years and older who are classified as self-employed, with individuals counted in only one category. In 2001, the Indigenous rate (7.2%) was substantially lower than the non-Indigenous rate (11.7%), reflecting structural barriers to entrepreneurship, including limited access to capital, training, and markets.

Over the following decade, the Indigenous self-employment rate remained flat at 6.6% in both 2006 and 2011, while the non-Indigenous rate declined from 13.5% in 2006 to 11.3% in 2011. And in 2011, the Métis self-employment rate reached 12.6%, surpassing the non-Indigenous rate (11.3%) for the first time. That said, a decline occurred in 2016, with the overall Indigenous rate falling slightly to 7.2%, while the non-Indigenous rate stood at 12.0%. This dip may reflect tightening labour markets, decreased capital support, shifts in employment structures, or changing census response patterns. Between 2016 and 2021, however, Indigenous self-employment rose from 7.2% to 9.9%, while the non-Indigenous rate also increased, from 12.0% to 14.1% (consult Table 1). Although the absolute gains were similar (2.7 percentage points for Indigenous and 2.1 for non-Indigenous), the Indigenous increase represents a proportionally larger rise (+37.5% compared to +17.5%). This rebound was particularly strong among First Nations, whose rate rose from 6.1% to 8.0%, and Métis, from 9.6% to 11.7%. Inuit self-employment remained comparatively flat at around 4.0%. This pattern suggests that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations turned to self-employment during the pandemic period, likely in response to job loss, underemployment, or gaps in wage labour opportunities. In contrast, the non-Indigenous rate remained relatively stable, further closing the historic gap between the two populations.

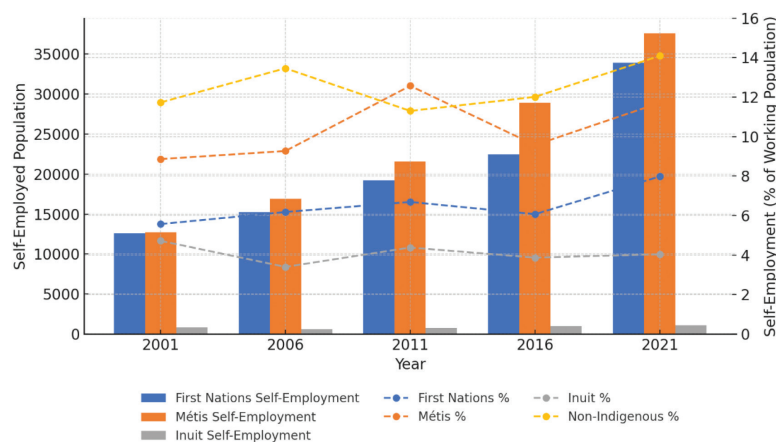
TABLE 1
Self-Employment Rates

	2001	2006	2011	2016	2021
First Nations	5.6%	6.2%	6.7%	6.1%	8.5%
Metis	8.9%	9.3%	12.6%	9.6%	11.7%
Inuit	4.7%	3.4%	4.4%	3.9%	4%
Indigenous	7.2%	6.6%	6.6%	7.2%	9.9%
Non-Indigenous	11.7%	13.5%	11.3%	12%	14.1%

Note. Table data are from Statistics Canada (2001b; 2006; 2011; 2016; 2021)..

To better understand this shift, it is helpful to examine not only self-employment rates but also the absolute number of Indigenous self-employed individuals over time. As shown in Figure 2, between 2001 and 2021 all three Indigenous groups experienced growth in the number of entrepreneurs, with especially sharp increases in the last census period. First Nations saw a substantial rise in absolute terms, nearly doubling the number of entrepreneurs between 2016 and 2021.

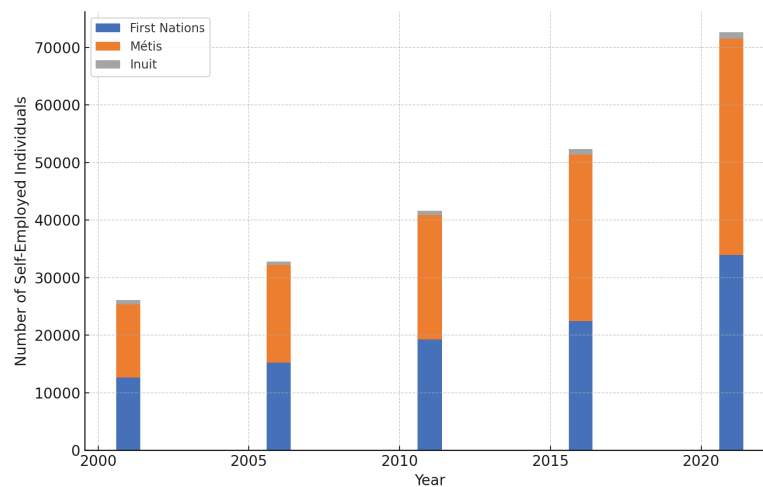
FIGURE 2
Indigenous Self-Employment: Absolute Population and Percentage of Working Population



Note. Chart data are from Statistics Canada (2001b; 2006; 2011; 2016; 2021).

Figure 3 illustrates that while all three groups showed numeric growth in self-employment, the rate of increase among First Nations between 2016-2021 is proportionally higher than previous periods, signalling a potential shift in self-employment engagement following expanded NACCA loans. This pattern becomes clearer when comparing absolute self-employment counts by identity groups. While Métis continue to represent the largest number of self-employed Indigenous Peoples, the Inuit number remains low and relatively stable, reinforcing the need to interpret self-employment trends within the identity populations, rather than overall Indigenous self-employment growth alone.

FIGURE 3
Number of Indigenous Self-Employed by Group (2001-2021)



Note. Chart data are from Statistics Canada (2001b; 2006; 2011; 2016; 2021).

While individual-level self-employment rates rose sharply between 2016 and 2021, particularly among First Nations and Métis, business registry data tell a more complex story. According to Gueye (2024), the number of Indigenous-owned businesses increased by 42.7% between 2005 and 2021, with most of that growth occurring prior to 2018. After peaking in 2018, Indigenous-owned businesses declined by 0.6% in 2019 and by 2.2% in 2021. In contrast, non-Indigenous-owned businesses continued to grow through 2020, increasing by 50% since 2005. This divergence suggests that while more Indigenous individuals turned to self-employment during the pandemic, this did not always translate into formalized business ownership, possibly due to resource constraints or informal economic activity. Recent analyses of labour market outcomes among Indigenous people living off-reserve during the pandemic show similar disruptions and uneven recovery patterns (Lamb, 2024). Because the Census classifies individuals

as self-employed only when it is their primary job during the reference week, while registry data include all incorporated Indigenous-owned enterprises regardless of the owner's main income source, the two measures are not strictly comparable. Nonetheless, Gueye's findings remain consistent with the disaggregated self-employment data presented in this article: Métis continue to hold the largest share of Indigenous-owned businesses, followed by First Nations, and then Inuit. This reinforces the importance of disaggregation, as each group demonstrates distinct levels of engagement and growth trajectories in both self-employment and registered enterprise formation.

Access to Capital and Entrepreneurial Support

A critical factor influencing self-employment trends among Indigenous Peoples is access to start-up and operating capital. The National Aboriginal Capital Corporations Association (NACCA), a national organization representing over 50 Indigenous Financial Institutions (IFIs), plays a central role in facilitating this access. NACCA provides financial and business support to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit entrepreneurs for both start-up and expansion purposes. Their investments are often the only source of commercial financing available to Indigenous individuals, particularly in rural or on-reserve communities where mainstream lenders remain limited or inaccessible.

As shown in Figure 4, fluctuations in NACCA loan disbursements align with shifts in self-employment trends. With lower capital availability in 2016, a corresponding dip in Indigenous self-employment rates occurred, and a sharp rebound in both loan activity and self-employment were found in 2020 and 2021. Capital injection points appear to function as catalysts to self-employment, suggesting that self-employment is responsive to capital availability, rather than solely driven by other factors alone.

FIGURE 4
NACCA Loan Disbursements and Indigenous Self-Employment Rates



Note: Loan Amount y-axis starts at \$100 million to highlight year-to-year differences.
2022 NACCA loan data is compared with 2021 self-employment rates.

Note. Chart data are from NACCA (2012; 2017; 2023) and Statistics Canada (2001b; 2006; 2011; 2016; 2021).

Loan disbursement data from NACCA reveal important patterns. In 2011, NACCA distributed over \$122 million in loans (NACCA, 2012), coinciding with one of the highest observed self-employment rates in the Indigenous population. Funding dropped to \$110 million in 2016, aligning with a corresponding decline in self-employment that year (NACCA, 2017). By 2022, loans had rebounded to \$113 million, and in 2021 alone, NACCA distributed an additional \$160 million in COVID-19 relief funding to Indigenous businesses (NACCA, 2023).

To illustrate this connection more clearly, Figure 4 also includes the 2011, 2016, and 2021 self-employment numbers across the three identity groups. In 2011, the number of self-employed individuals was 19,235 for First Nations (6.69%), 21,605 for Métis (12.57%), and 770 for Inuit (4.38%). By 2016, these figures stood at 20,510 for First Nations (6.06%), 28,880 for Métis (9.58%), and 980 for Inuit (3.94%). By 2021, they rose to 33,920 for First Nations (7.98%), 37,615 for Métis (11.71%), and 1,095 for Inuit (4.04%) (Gueye, 2024). This more complete trend shows that while NACCA's capital support dipped in 2016, Indigenous self-employment also fell, but both rebounded strongly by 2021. The surge in financing and targeted COVID-19 supports may partially explain why Indigenous self-employment rose during this difficult period, despite the broader economic challenges caused by the pandemic.

Importantly, Gueye's (2024) analysis highlights a different dimension: although Indigenous-owned, registered businesses grew significantly from 2005 to 2017, they began to decline after 2018. This decline does not contradict rising self-employment rates but instead suggests a decoupling between entrepreneurial activity and formal business registration. Many individuals may have turned to informal or sole-proprietor self-employment, which is captured in census data but not in registry counts. Together, these findings underscore that increases in individual self-employment during the pandemic did not always translate into sustainable or incorporated business ownership.

This divergence highlights the need for more accessible financing, regulatory reform, and culturally grounded business supports that allow Indigenous entrepreneurs not only to start but to sustain and grow formal enterprises.

Underutilization of External Support

Data from the 2017 Aboriginal Peoples Survey reveal that 88% of self-employed First Nations, 72% of self-employed Inuit, and 91% of self-employed Métis did not receive any form of external business assistance (Statistics Canada, 2017). This includes support from Indigenous, federal, provincial, or municipal sources. These figures suggest not only underutilization but a broader disconnect between available supports and the realities faced by Indigenous business owners.

The amount of funding that NACCA provides to entrepreneurs decreased from 2011-2022 and the absolute number of self-employed Indigenous people has risen in Canada. This decrease in funds means that the average per capita dollar amount per self-employed Indigenous person has also decreased. That is, the same financial support available to entrepreneurs in 2011 does not exist in today's dollars.

While some entrepreneurs may intentionally choose to operate independently, the scale of non-engagement may reflect systemic issues, such as limited awareness of programs, lack of culturally relevant delivery, historic distrust of institutions, or barriers tied to application complexity or eligibility (Brooks, 2024). This information highlights the need for rethinking how entrepreneurial support is designed and delivered, shifting toward Indigenous-led, locally grounded institutions that can build relationships, reduce barriers, and deliver support in ways that reflect the cultural, geographic, and policy contexts of the communities they serve.

Discussion

While there has been growth in self-employment among all groups, the data indicate that rates and sustainability vary. The findings presented in this article highlight the importance of disaggregating Indigenous data by identity group. Aggregated figures can obscure significant differences in entrepreneurial activity between First Nations, Métis, and Inuit populations. While overall self-employment rates among Indigenous Peoples have improved over time, these improvements have not been evenly distributed. Métis individuals consistently report higher self-employment rates than both First Nations and Inuit, while Inuit remain underrepresented in entrepreneurship despite population growth. Each group faces distinct historical, geographic, and policy contexts that shape their access to capital, markets, and infrastructure. These legal and institutional barriers continue to limit the ability of many First Nations individuals to access mainstream financing or participate fully in the entrepreneurial economy.

Without disaggregation, policy responses risk being overgeneralized, failing to recognize these structurally imposed barriers. Disaggregated analysis not only reveals these distinctions but also supports more targeted and equitable investments. Initiatives such as those led by NACCA and its network of IFIs should be assessed not only in terms of overall reach but also their accessibility and relevance to each Indigenous population. If self-employment trends are to guide policy and programming, they should reflect the diversity of Indigenous lived experiences and economic realities.

These findings point to the need for targeted funding models and policy frameworks that account for the unique barriers experienced by each Indigenous group. A one-size-fits-all approach to entrepreneurship support risks reinforcing structural inequities rather than resolving them. Tailored programs that consider legislative constraints, geographic realities, and cultural contexts are critical for fostering equitable access to self-employment opportunities across First Nations, Métis, and Inuit populations. Early program evaluations (Oppenheimer et al., 2001) highlight the importance of locally delivered training and accessible financing for Indigenous entrepreneurs. While these foundational elements remain important, contemporary research and practice show that broader structural factors, including access to capital at scale, distinctions-based supports, and policy reform are increasingly central to advancing Indigenous entrepreneurship.

Conclusion

Between 2001 and 2021, Indigenous self-employment rates have risen steadily, narrowing a long-standing gap with the non-Indigenous population. Métis consistently report the highest rates, while Inuit remain underrepresented. First Nations, despite notable growth, continue to face structural barriers linked to the Indian Act. Access to capital, particularly through NACCA, appears to correspond with key inflection points in growth. However, 2017 data show that the vast majority of Indigenous entrepreneurs (88% of First Nations and 91% of Métis) did not access external business assistance. These findings highlight the need for disaggregated data and tailored funding models that address group-specific barriers to entrepreneurship.

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