

North Superior Training Board and Northwest Training and Adjustment Board

---

# **Population Change in Northwestern Ontario: An Analysis of the 2001 Census Data**

Prepared on March 12, 2002  
By Chris Southcott  
Department of Sociology  
Lakehead University

For the North Superior Training Board and the Northwest Training and Adjustment Board

# Section One: Introduction

## Background to the Report

This study is done in preparation for Environmental Scan 2002, an analysis of socio-economic trends in Northwestern Ontario and the effect that these trends are having on training and adjustment needs. It is a joint effort of the North Superior Training Board (Local Board Area 24) and the Northwest Training and Adjustment Board (Local Board Area 25). They are two of the 25 Local Area Training Boards established in Ontario in 1994 and the two Boards which represent Northwestern Ontario. They were created to assist in assessing the training needs and issues of each area. Each Board is made up of representatives of the key labour market partner groups including primarily business and labour but also including educators and trainers, women, persons with disabilities, francophones, and racial minorities. The Boards also have non-voting representatives from the municipal, provincial, and federal governments. The Boards are sponsored by Human Resources and Development Canada and the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities.

As part of their planning process these Boards are mandated to produce an Environmental Scan for their particular area every year. An Environmental Scan is just one aspect of a broader framework of activities undertaken by the Boards each year. It forms the basis for the Local Boards' planning processes and enables the Boards to engage the community in helping to identify and act upon training and adjustment needs. The primary purposes of an Environmental Scan are:

- to capture underlying shifts, trends and changes in the socio-economic environment of the Board area
- to assess and analyze the training and adjustment needs of the Local Board Area
- to identify opportunities and constraints in the local environment
- to assess previous years results and identify areas needing change

The overall purpose of the Environmental Scan is to serve as the base upon which the Local Board may build a Strategic Plan and a Local Board Area Plan.

This analysis of the 2001 population data for Northwestern Ontario is the first part of an extensive analysis of new census data which will be undertaken by both Boards. Population data is one of the most important indicators of economic and social trends.

## Methodology

This report is based on newly released data from the 2001 Census as prepared by Statistics Canada. The data was retrieved from the Statistics Canada Census 2001 web site on March 12, 2002. Data is also used from other Census years as compiled by Statistics Canada.

# Section Two: Background to Population Change in Northwestern Ontario

## 2.1 An Introduction to the Region

This report covers the region of Northwestern Ontario, an area comprising over 50% of the land mass of Ontario but with only 2.2% of its population. Northwestern Ontario is divided into three Districts: that of Kenora, Rainy River, and Thunder Bay.<sup>1</sup> The District of Thunder Bay is the most populous. It includes the city of Thunder Bay and a number of smaller resource dependent communities along with several First Nations communities. It is this area that is represented by the North Superior Training Board.<sup>2</sup> The Districts of Kenora and Rainy River are represented by the Northwest Training and Adjustment Board. It is comprised of resource dependent communities and First Nations communities.

The history of continuous settlement by non-Natives is relatively recent when compared to the rest of Ontario. Settlement in earnest started with the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway in the late 1870s and 1880s. This was soon followed by the construction of the Canadian Northern Railway and the Grand Trunk and National Transcontinental Railways. Most non-Native communities in the region were initially railway towns.

Following the building of the railways, the region's growth has been driven primarily by the forest industries and, to a lesser extent, by mining. The development of these communities were, for the most part, undertaken by large resource extraction corporations based outside the region rather than by local entrepreneurs. This fact has meant that the social and economic structure of this region exhibits several unique characteristics such as:<sup>3</sup>

1) An overdependence on natural resource exploitation - This has meant a high degree of vulnerability to resource depletion, world commodity prices, corporate policy changes, the boom and bust cycles of the resource industries, changes in the Canadian exchange rate, and changes in government policies regarding Northern Ontario.<sup>4</sup>

2) A high degree of dependency on external forces - The fact that most communities were developed by outside forces means that local entrepreneurship has been more limited than other areas. This has served as a barrier to the cultivation of an entrepreneurial culture in these communities. This is also seen in the area of political decision-making. Unlike most areas of Ontario, Northern Ontario is made up of Districts instead of Counties. Unlike Counties, Districts do not have regional governments. Northern Ontario is unique in Ontario in that unlike the Counties of Southern Ontario there is no regional government serving as an intermediary between the provincial governments and municipalities.<sup>5</sup>

While all communities in share some of these characteristics, Northwestern Ontario can be divided internally into three different types of communities:

The City of Thunder Bay - The city of Thunder Bay makes up over half of the population of Northwestern Ontario. Its population has been stable for the past 30 years. While it is heavily dependent on the forest industry it is the relatively diversified in that it is the major center for health, education, and other services for the region. It is also the site of Bombardier Transportation, the only major manufacturing industry in the region not directly dependent on natural resources. At one time the city also benefitted from the transportation of grain through its major elevators but this activity has been seriously reduced in the last 15 years.

Resource Dependent Communities - The vast majority of the remaining non-Native communities in the region are resource dependent communities or single industry towns which share many distinct characteristics.<sup>6</sup> These communities are smaller and less diversified economically than the city of Thunder Bay. They are much more directly dependent on resource industries. In Northwestern Ontario most of these communities are also dependent on the city of Thunder Bay for the delivery of services.<sup>7</sup> While these towns share the common characteristics of resource dependent communities, they also differ according to their industrial base. Pulp and paper towns have tended to be more stable than sawmill towns and sawmill towns have tended to be more stable than mining towns.

First Nations Communities - The region of Northwestern Ontario is unique in Ontario in terms of its large number of First Nations communities. The Aboriginal population makes up between 10 and 15 percent of the population of the region.<sup>8</sup> The population in the area of the region north of the 50<sup>th</sup> parallel is almost entirely made up of these communities. First Nations communities face the greatest number of social and economic challenges of all the communities in the region. It should be pointed out that data for First Nation communities in Northwestern Ontario is problematic. In the past, many communities have refused to participate in census gathering activities.

While this report will primarily deal with the region of Northwestern Ontario as a whole, it is important to remember the Local Board Area 24 and Local Board Area 25 differ in that Local Board Area 24 is made up primarily of the City of Thunder Bay along with a several resource dependent communities and some First Nations communities. Local Board Area 25 is made up solely of resource dependent communities and First Nations communities.

## 2.2 Socio-Economic Trends Identified in Previous Environmental Scans

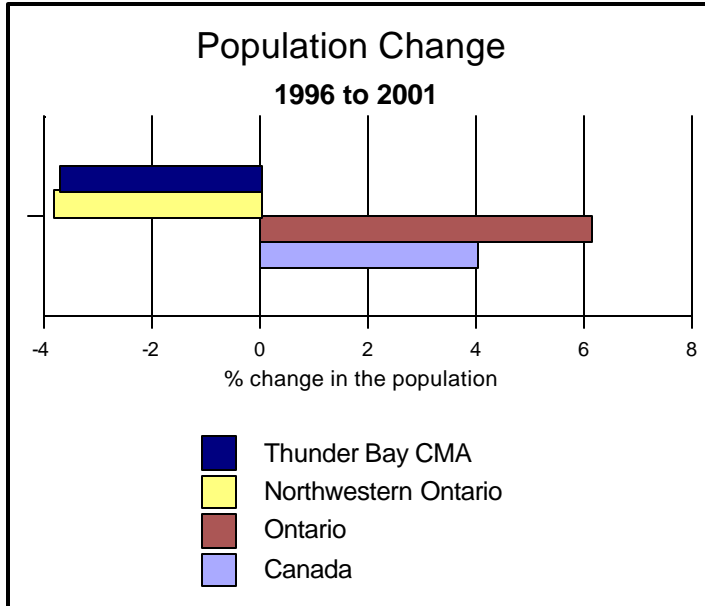
Previous Environmental Scans have indicated the following trends in the region:

- The slowing of growth relative to Ontario as a whole
- The decline of Blue Collar industrial jobs and the rise of the Service Sector
- Increasing presence of women in the paid workforce
- The non-Native population is aging at a faster rate than the province as a whole
- Youth Out-migration.
- Absence of new immigrants.
- Levels of education continue to lag behind provincial averages.
- Recent increase in size of the labour force and number of employed.
- Recent growth is widely-based across industries.
- Most recent growth is outside the City of Thunder Bay.
- Decrease in the participation rate of males in the labour force.
- Increase in level of self-employment.
- Increase in Aboriginal participation in region

## Section Three: Changes in the Population Since 1996

**Table 1: Population Change in Northwestern Ontario Since 1996**

	1996	2001	%Change
Canada	28846761	30007094	4
Ontario	10753573	11410046	6.1
Northwestern Ontario	244117	234771	-3.8
Thunder Bay CMA	126643	121986	-3.7
Thunder Bay District	157619	150860	-4.3
Thunder Bay (City)	113662	109016	-4.1
Red Rock	1258	1233	-2
Nipigon	2210	1964	-11.1
Schreiber	1788	1448	-19
Terrace Bay	2324	1950	-16.1
Marathon	4791	4416	-7.8
Manitouwadge	3395	2949	-13.1
Greenstone <sup>9</sup>	6530	5662	-13.3
Rainy River District	23163	22109	-4.4
Atikokan	4043	3632	-10.2
Fort Frances	8790	8315	-5.4
Emo	1366	1331	-2.6
Rainy River (Town)	1008	981	-2.7
Kenora District	63335	61802	-2.5
Ignace	1782	1709	-4.1
Kenora (Town)	16365	15838	-3.2
Dryden	8289	8198	-1.1
Ear Falls	1170	1150	-1.7
Sioux Lookout	5165	5336	3.3
Red Lake	5165	5336	-11.4
Pickle Lake	544	399	-26.7



**1.1 Significant Decline in the Population of Northwestern Ontario**

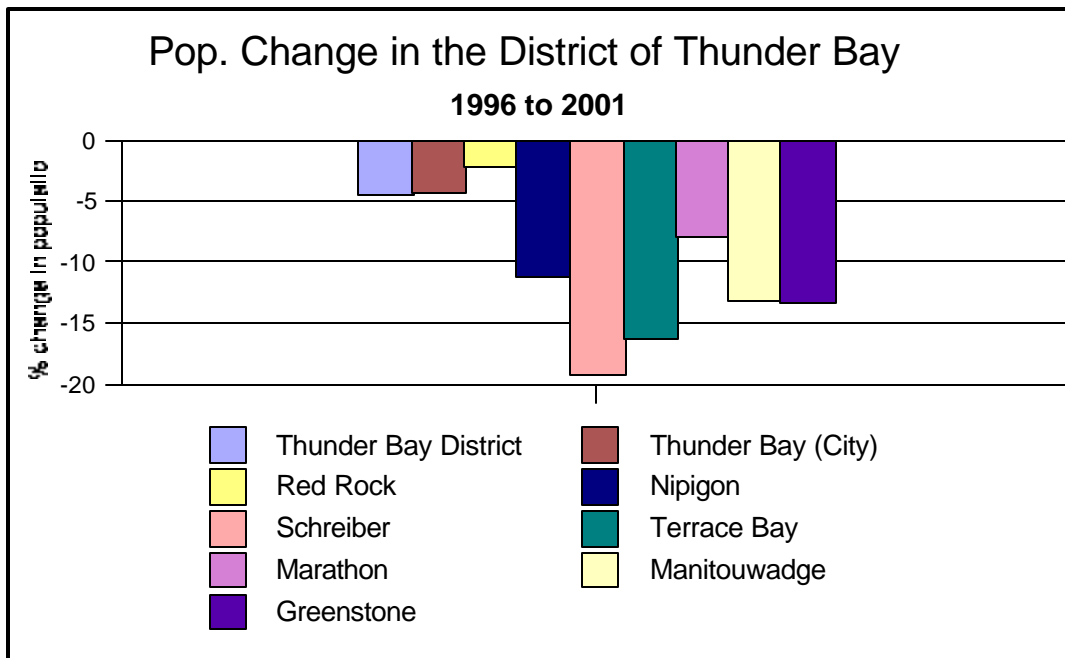
The most important statistic coming out of the 2001 Census for Northwestern Ontario is that **Figure 1**

whereas Canada and Ontario grew in population from 1996 to 2001, Northwestern Ontario suffered a significant decline. This decline came despite forecasts which had projected growth. The Population Estimates prepared by the Ontario Ministry of Finance had forecasted growth rates of 3% for Northwestern Ontario between 1996 and 2001. Actual figures show that the population of Northwestern Ontario declined by 3.8% from 244,117 to 234,771.

**3.2 The District of Thunder Bay**

The District of Thunder Bay declined by 4.3%. While most major communities in the district experienced a decline, there were variations in the rates of decline.

**Figure 2**

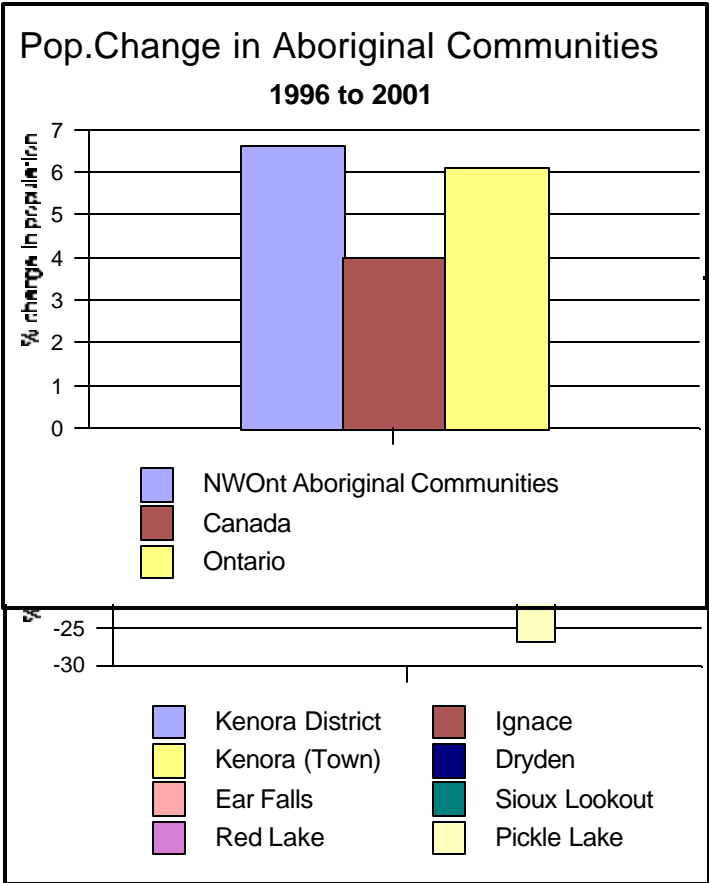


In 2 we

Figure see that

Schreiber, at -19%, had the greatest percentage decline in its population followed by Terrace Bay. Statistics Canada lists the newly created municipality of Greenstone as experiencing a 13.3% decline. There appears, however, to be a disparity between the newly calculated population number for 1996 and the totals listed for the separate

communities of Greenstone in 1996. The communities with the least decline were Red Rock, at -2%, and the City of Thunder Bay, with a decline of 4.1%. Outside of Aboriginal communities, the places that saw some growth were the suburb communities of Thunder Bay. Shuniah grew by 5.1%, Gillies grew by 5%, and Conmee grew by 2.6%.



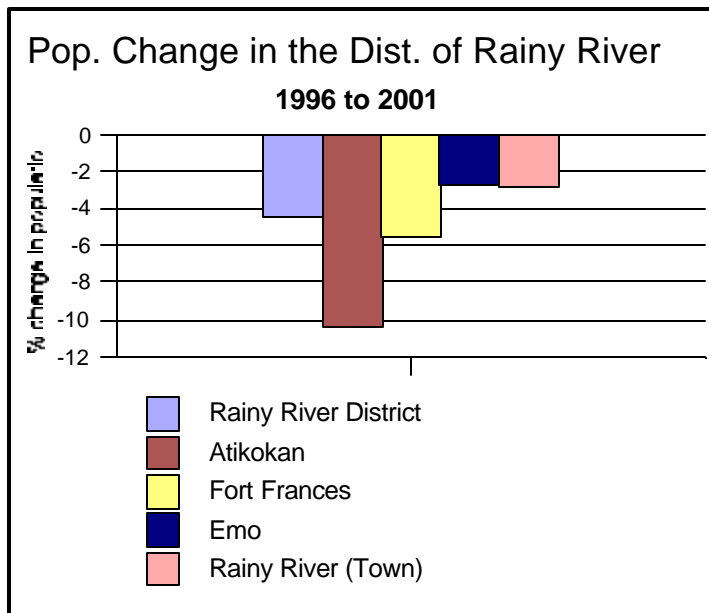
**Figure 3**  
**3.3 The District of Kenora**

Figure 3 shows that compared to the District of Thunder Bay, the District of Kenora had lower rates of decline. Those communities with the highest rates of decline were Pickle Lake, at -26.7% and Red Lake, at -11.4%. Sioux Lookout was one of the few communities that had a population that grew from 1996 to 2001. Its population grew by 3.3%.

2001. Fort Frances declined by 5.4% while Emo and Rainy River had the lowest relative rates of decline at 2.6% and 2.7% respectively.

**3.4 The District of Rainy River**  
**Figure 4**

The population of the District of Rainy River declined by 4.4%. The community which experienced the greatest decline was Atikokan which lost 10.2% of its population from 1996 to 2001.



**3.5 Population Change in the Region's Aboriginal Communities**  
**Figure 5**

As stated earlier, population figures for the region's Aboriginal communities are not as reliable as for non-Native communities. That being said, it is possible to get an overall idea of what is happening in these communities by selected those communities with the most reliable data and extrapolating from this information. If we take all those Aboriginal communities<sup>10</sup> that completed both the 1996 Census and the 2001 Census, we find that these communities experienced average growth rates of 6.6%. This represents growth rates higher than that for both Canada and Ontario.

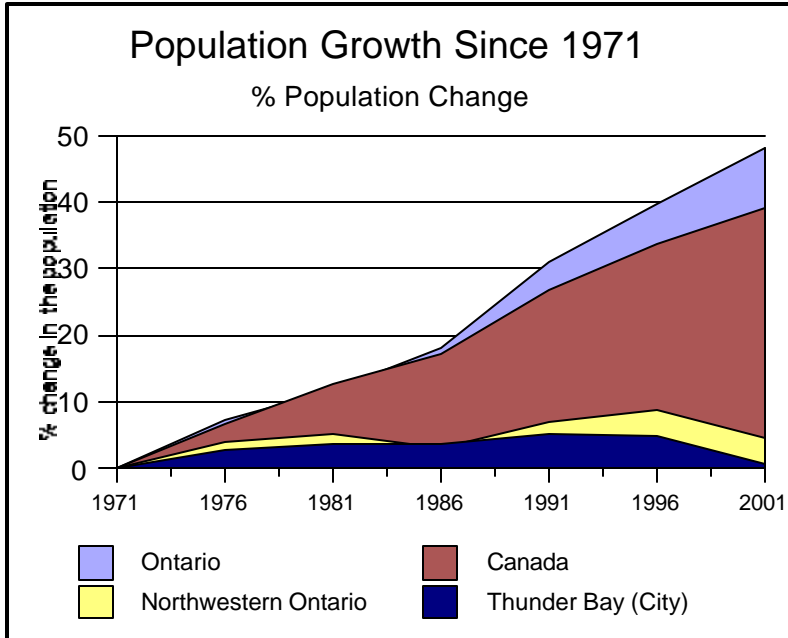
## Section Four: Changes in the Population Since 1971

Populations can vary significantly from one five year period to another. For a better understanding of overall population trends, the statistics for 2001 need to be seen in a more historical context. Comparing the population changes since 1971 gives us a better idea of the underlying trends in our region.

It should be noted that there are problems in comparing the totals for the communities in Northwestern Ontario since 1971. Changes in the geographic composition of communities means that special adjustments must be made to account for these changes. The numbers for the 2001 Census are problematic for the communities of Kenora, Dryden, Sioux Lookout, Red Lake, and Greenstone. These communities recently underwent a process of municipal restructuring whereby various neighbouring communities were merged into one larger community. In the case of Kenora, the adjusted totals are arrived at fairly easily by adding the previous totals for the communities of Kenora, Keewatin, and Jaffray and Melick. The new town of Dryden includes areas not previously listed in published census data. It is therefore difficult to adjust the earlier census totals. Since the adjusted 1996 numbers for the new Dryden are less than 25% more than the old Dryden, it is possible to use a formula to adjust the previous census numbers.<sup>11</sup> The totals for the new communities of Sioux Lookout and Red Lake are more statistically problematic as the change in these communities was more than 45%. Until more reliable totals are available from Statistics Canada these communities will be excluded from our historical analysis. As mentioned previously, there appears to be problems with the adjusted totals for 1996 in the community of Greenstone. Until these totals can be verified, Greenstone will also be excluded from our analysis.

<b>Table 2: Population Change in Northwestern Ontario Since 1971</b>	<b>1971</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>% Change</b>
<b>Canada</b>	21568311	30007094	39.1
<b>Ontario</b>	7703106	11410046	48.1
<b>Northwestern Ontario</b>	224370	234771	4.6
<b>Thunder Bay (City)</b>	108411	109016	0.6
<b>Thunder Bay District</b>	145390	150860	3.8
<b>Red Rock</b>	1892	1233	-34.8
<b>Nipigon</b>	2637	1964	-25.5
<b>Schreiber</b>	2089	1448	-30.7
<b>Terrace Bay</b>	1860	1950	4.8
<b>Marathon</b>	2456	4416	79.8
<b>Manitouwadge</b>	3340	2949	-11.7
<b>Rainy River District</b>	25750	22109	-14.1
<b>Atikokan</b>	6087	3632	-40.3
<b>Fort Frances</b>	9947	8315	-16.4
<b>Emo</b>	1110	1331	19.9
<b>Rainy River (Town)</b>	1196	981	-18.0
<b>Kenora District</b>	53230	61802	16.1
<b>Ignace</b>	817	1709	109.2
<b>Kenora (Adjusted)</b>	16165	15838	-2.0
<b>Dryden (Adjusted)</b>	8570	8198	-4.3
<b>Ear Falls</b>	1479	1150	-22.2

Both Table 2 and Figure 6 show the extent to which Northwestern Ontario has had slower growth rates than that of Ontario and Canada since 1971. While Ontario has grown by almost 50% since 1971, Northwestern Ontario has grown by only 4.6%. Figure 7 shows that until the 1960s, growth rates for Northwestern Ontario were close, if not higher, than those for Ontario. Since 1971 the city of Thunder Bay has seen its population stagnate, with a 0.6%



growth rate. Table 2 also shows that growth rates during this period vary significantly between communities. Atikokan has the largest population loss. The closure of the iron ore mines in the 1970s has meant that the population of Atikokan is 40% less than what it was in 1971. The town of Red Rock, hard hit by downsizing in its pulp and packaging mill in the early 1990s, experienced a decrease of almost 35%. Rationalization in the railways contributed to a decline in the population of Schreiber by 30.7%.

The community which saw the highest level of growth during the past 30 years was the town of Ignace. This growth was initially caused by mining operations started in the

1970s but when

these shut down the community was able to diversify into forestry operations. Marathon grew by almost 80% during this period. This growth is almost entirely due to the opening of gold mining operations in the Hemlo gold field during the 1980s. The town of Sioux Lookout is not

**Figure 6**

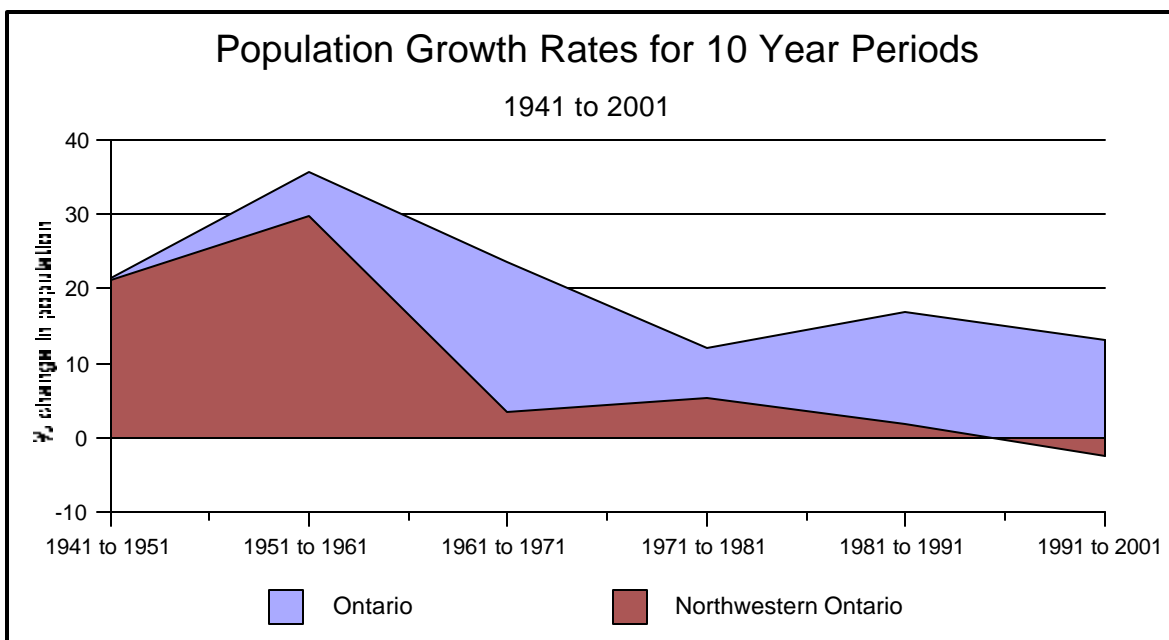
listed in the figures in this report because of municipal restructuring and the difficulty determining reliable numbers for the years before 1996. Still, the old town of Sioux Lookout had grown by 20.5% from 1971 to 1996. Since the new town, which now encompasses several of the surrounding communities, saw growth of 3.3% between 1996 and 2001, it is reasonable to assume that Sioux Lookout also experienced a population growth rate in excess of 20% over the past 30 years. This growth came despite the negative effects of railway rationalization and is due primarily to the growth of services to the outlying Aboriginal communities.

**Table 3: Percentage Population Change from Census to Census Since 1971**

	1971 to 1976	1976 to 1981	1981 to 1986	1986 to1991	1991 to 1996	1996 to 2001
Canada	6.6	5.9	4	7.9	5.7	4
Ontario	7.3	4.4	5.5	10.8	6.6	6.1
Northwestern Ontario	4.0	1.2	-2	4	1.5	-3.8
Thunder Bay (City)	2.8	0.9	-0.2	1.5	-0.2	-4.1
Thunder Bay District	3.6	2.2	1.1	2	-0.7	-4.3
Red Rock	-10.5	-9.0	-1.9	-5.8	-11.5	-2
Nipigon	3.3	-5.0	-6.1	-3.8	-5.5	-11.1
Schreiber	-3.8	-2.1	-1	-2.1	-6	-19
Terrace Bay	12.8	26.0	1.8	-8	-6.2	-16.1
Marathon	-7.0	-0.3	50.9	47.3	-5.4	-7.8
Manitouwadge	6.3	-10.4	10.7	12.8	-14.5	-13.1
Rainy River District	-3.8	-8.0	0.3	0.6	0.7	-4.4
Atikokan	-4.7	-23.3	-2.2	-6.9	-0.1	-10.2
Fort Frances	-6.3	-5.2	0.4	0.2	-1.1	-5.4
Rainy River (Town)	-8.7	-2.8	-11.3	2.9	4.1	-2.7
Kenora District	8.9	2.5	-11.1	11.2	7.8	-2.5
Ignace	142.7	26.0	-7.4	-16.4	-7.9	-4.1

	1971 to 1976	1976 to 1981	1981 to 1986	1986 to 1991	1991 to 1996	1996 to 2001
<b>Kenora (Town)</b>	-1.4	-3.7	-0.6	4.2	2.9	-3.2
<b>Dryden</b>	-2.0	-2.3	-2.7	0.7	3.2	-1.1
<b>Ear Falls</b>	34.0	2.3	-16.2	-23.7	-9.6	-1.7

Table 3 shows that while there has been a slowing of the growth rates for the region overall since 1971, there has been important variations from census year to census year in most communities. Examples of this are the communities of Ignace and Marathon. From 1976 to 1981 the population of Ignace grew by 26%. From 1981 to 1986 the population of this community decreased by 7.4%. From 1986 to 1991 the population of Marathon grew by 47.3%, yet from 1991 to 1996 its population decreased by 5.4%. These variations make it difficult to state that



communities in Northwestern Ontario have been in a steady state of decline. The resource-based nature of these communities means they are still prone to boom and bust fluctuations.

Figure 7

# Conclusions

As was predicted in earlier Environmental Scans done by the two regional training boards, the population of Northwestern Ontario declined from 1996 to 2001. This decline was seen in most non-Native communities in the region. The only communities of this type that saw growth were the town of Sioux Lookout and suburb communities around the city of Thunder Bay. Those communities that experienced the greatest decline were Atikokan and most North Shore communities in the District of Thunder Bay. While there was a great deal of variation from community to community, based on our indicator, the Aboriginal communities in Northwestern Ontario had an average growth rate of 6.6%.

The slow rate of growth is the continuation of a trend that started in the 1960s. While rates of growth for the region as a whole have been slow, growth rates in communities have varied extensively during the period from 1971 to 2001. Such variation makes it difficult to predict a slow steady rate of decline for the region.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> The three districts also make up the three census divisions which are combined to calculate the census-based statistics for Northwestern Ontario.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that the board area for the North Superior Training Board varies somewhat from the boundaries for the District of Thunder Bay. The same is true for the area covered by the Northwest Training and Adjustment Board in that it varies somewhat from the boundaries of the District of Kenora. These variations are not significant enough to alter the fundamental trends found using the District boundaries.

<sup>3</sup> This has been pointed out by several government studies undertaken over the past 30 years including the Royal Commission on the Northern Environment (the Fahlgren Report) and the Task Force on Resource Dependent Communities in Northern Ontario (the Rosehart Report).

<sup>4</sup> For an elaboration on these points see Dadgostar et al, 1992, p.2.

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed discussion of this aspect of Northwestern Ontario see McBride et al., 1993.

<sup>6</sup> An elaboration on these unique characteristics can be found in Randall and Ironsides, 1996. Our operational definition of single industry towns in Northwestern Ontario includes the following communities: Longlac, Manitouwadge, Marathon, Geraldton, Terrace Bay, Schreiber, Nipigon, Red Rock, Ignace, Dryden, Red Lake, Ear Falls, Kenora, Rainy River, Fort Frances, and Atikokan.

<sup>7</sup> The degree of dependence varies with proximity to another major center. In the western part of the region towns such as Kenora tend to rely on Winnipeg for many services while in the eastern part towns such as Manitouwadge also access services in Sault Ste. Marie.

<sup>8</sup> Census population statistics for First Nations communities tend to be less reliable than those for non-Native communities.

<sup>9</sup> The 1996 population total that was calculated for the new municipality of Greenstone appears to be in error. It may be that some of the geographic areas were wrongly included as part of Greenstone in that particular year. This is currently being verified by Statistics Canada.

<sup>10</sup> Here Aboriginal communities refer to those types listed with either an R or S-E. The following communities were included in the calculations: Aroland 83, Fort William 52, Ginoogaming First Nation, Gull River 55, Lake Helen 53A, Long Lake 58, Pays Plat 51, Pic Mobert North, Pic Mobert South, Agency 1, Big Grassy River 35G, Big

---

Island Mainland 93, Couchiching 16A, Long Sault 12, Manitou Rapids 11, Neguaguon Lake 25D, Rainy Lake 17A , Rainy Lake 17B, Rainy Lake 18C, Rainy Lake 26A, Saug-a-Gaw-Sing 1, Attawapiskat 91A, Bearskin Lake, Cat Lake 63C, Deer Lake, Eagle Lake 27, English River 21, Fort Hope 64, Fort Severn 89, Islington 29, Kasabonika Lake, Kee-Way-Win, Kingfisher Lake 1, Lac Seul 28, Lake Of The Woods 37, Lansdowne House, Muskrat Dam Lake, North Spirit Lake, Northwest Angle 33B, Peawanuck, Poplar Hill, Rat Portage 38A, Sabaskong Bay 35D, Sachigo Lake ,1 Sandy Lake 88, Shoal Lake (Part) 39A, Shoal Lake 34B2, Slate Falls, Summer Beaver, The Dalles 38C, Wabauskang 21, Wabigoon Lake 27, Wapekeka 2, Wawakapewin (Long Dog Lake)

11. The adjusted totals are arrived at by multiplying the old numbers by 1.235. The difference between the 1996 totals for the old and new Dryden is 23.5%. The assumption is made that population growth rates for the areas integrated into the new Dryden are relatively close to that of Dryden itself in the years 1971 to 1996.

## Bibliography

Dadgostar, B., Jankowski, W.B., and Moazzami, B.

1992 The Economy of Northwestern Ontario: Structure, Performance and Future Challenges, Thunder Bay: Centre for Northern Studies, Lakehead University.

McBride, Stephen, McKay, Sharon, and Hill, Mary Ellen

1993 "Unemployment in a Northern Hinterland: The Social Impact of Political Neglect" in Chris Southcott (ed.) A Provincial Hinterland: Social Inequality in Northwestern Ontario, Halifax: Fernwood.

Ontario Ministry of the Attorney General

1985 Royal Commission on the Northern Environment: Final Report and Recommendations (the Fahlgren Report), Toronto.

Randall, James and R. G. Ironside

1996 "Communities on the Edge: An Economic Geography of Resource-Dependent Communities in Canada" The Canadian Geographer 40(10):17-35