



# Rural western Canada: Communities by the numbers

Notes from the Co-operative Innovation Project — September 2015

*There are over two thousand communities in western Canada – and of those, 77% are rural. What does that mean for western Canada’s social and economic development?*

## The Co-operative Innovation Project

From 2014-2015, the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives at the University of Saskatchewan led the Co-operative Innovation Project to explore the possibilities of the co-operative model to solve needs in rural and Aboriginal communities across western Canada.

Through on-line and telephone surveys and open events in communities in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia, the Co-operative Innovation Project asked: what are the needs in your community? And, what do you know about co-ops?

What we heard: rural and rural Aboriginal communities want to put ‘rural’ back on the provincial and federal radar:

- “There is an agenda to shut down small communities across Canada.”
- “Government centralizes things into the cities to save money.”
- “A shift in attitude in the government is necessary. Not everything has to be in the cities”
- “Supports are inadequate or not relevant to the area or situation.”
- “Wanting government to ‘get out of the way’ ... a lot of laws/regulations imposed in a blanket fashion across the province.”
- “Government needs to step up to the plate.”

## What is ‘rural’? What is ‘Aboriginal’?

In line with international research on co-operatives, we used *population density* to define ‘rural.’ Using 2011 Statistics Canada data, any Census Subdivision (CSD)

with a population density of 150 people or less per square kilometer was defined as ‘rural.’

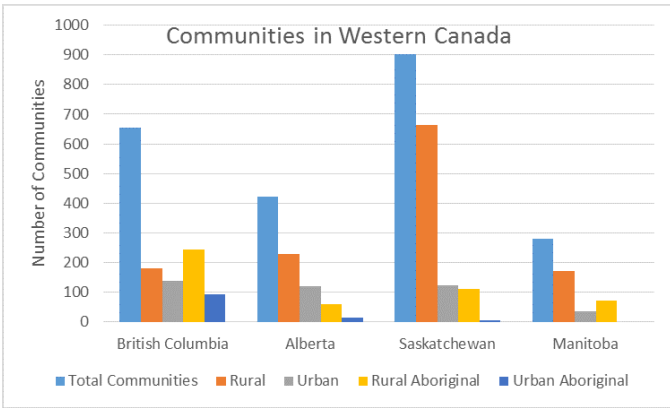
A point of note: CSD separates a village from its surrounding rural municipality – the result is that they are counted as separate communities. While in practice the communities may be highly integrated, they often have separate legal municipal entities, leaders, funding mechanisms, and needs.

Census Canada defines communities (CSDs) as ‘Aboriginal’ if the majority of its population identifies as being of Aboriginal ancestry (which includes First Nations, Métis, and Inuit). There may be many Aboriginal residents in a community defined as ‘non-Aboriginal,’ and vice versa.

## Greater numbers, fewer people.

Using our criteria, there are 2,259 communities in western Canada. Of those, 1,731 or nearly 77% can be considered ‘rural’: 1,244 (55%) are rural (non-Aboriginal) and 487 (21.5%) are rural (Aboriginal), which includes most First Nations reserves.

Saskatchewan has the highest number of municipal-level communities, as well as the highest number of rural communities – in fact, more than the other three provinces combined. British Columbia has the highest number of Aboriginal communities, both rural and urban. In fact, over half of BC’s total communities are Aboriginal. There are more rural Aboriginal communities than rural communities. Manitoba has the fewest number of communities overall, with the majority being rural and rural Aboriginal communities.



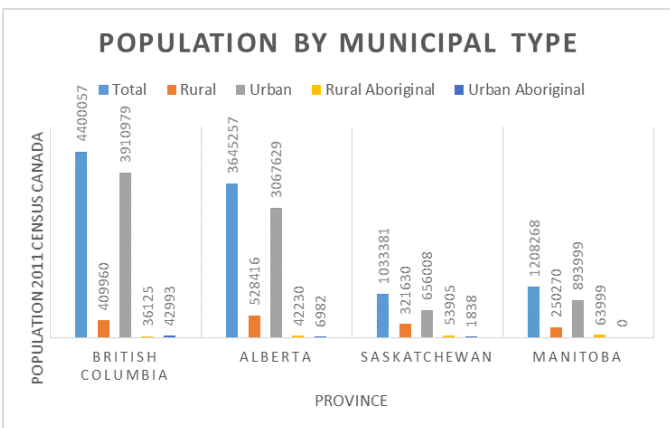
**Why it matters: what do communities do for you?**

In western Canada, most basic services – sewer, water, roads and other infrastructure surrounding energy and communications, schools and school boards, recreation and services such as libraries, parks, permits and planning, and emergency services (ambulance, First Responder, local hospital, fire or police services), for example – are closely tied to municipal or community responsibility. In other words, what you need for your everyday life is often provided *first* by the community in which you live.

Decision-making, planning, prioritizing, and funding for these basic needs is concentrated at the local level – which means that, no matter where you live (large city or small village), your municipality is making critical decisions that affect you.

**But who lives there?**

What community numbers don't tell you is population: where do western Canadians live?



Rural western Canada, even though there are far more rural than urban communities, holds just 16.5% of the population. The majority, 83.5%, live in urban communities.

But for Aboriginal people, the split falls the other way. In communities defined as primarily Aboriginal, 79% of the

population are in rural Aboriginal places. If we remove British Columbia, where a slim majority (54%) lives in urban Aboriginal communities, that number rises: in the three prairie provinces, rural Aboriginal communities hold 95% of Aboriginal community residents.

**Local problems, local solutions?**

The majority of communities in western Canada are rural. In today's policy environment, where there is a concerted move by all levels of government toward community-based service delivery, governments need to pay far more attention to how their top-down policies and funding formulas play out in rural western Canada.

Urban solutions are not always effective in rural contexts. With fewer people, fewer agencies at work, fewer options, and a much smaller local market economy, a top-down roll-out rarely suits a small local context. While it sometimes makes sense for development to prioritize the highest population and concentrate certain services in larger centers, many goods and services must remain at the local level. Rural and – in particular – Aboriginal communities will always have some critical responsibilities, and should be well-supported to meet those challenges.

One solution that suits local community development is the co-operative business model. A co-operative harnesses collective strength and abilities, including business know-how and willingness to work together, and focuses it to build a business that addresses a particular community need. Across western Canada, hundreds of co-operatives, of all sizes and in all industries, are working to make communities better.

Rural and Aboriginal communities, including those with high needs, remain vibrant. They offer residents a specific quality of life. In fact, given embedded cultural and legal bases, many rural Aboriginal communities – even if they have few residents – have more built-in longevity than their nearby rural counterparts.

Governments, at both the provincial and the federal level, require a fundamental shift in strategy. It's time to re-examine locally based solutions, such as co-operatives, and reorient planning and development to listen to communities, wherever they are at.



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