

Fast-growing visible minorities now 16% of Canadian population

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Canada's visible minority population has surpassed the five-million mark, according to the latest census report, more than doubling in 15 years.

The visible minority population grew five times faster than the population as whole between 2001 and 2006. Visible minority groups accounted for 16 per cent of Canada's population on the most recent census, according to Statistics Canada, up from 11 per cent a decade earlier.

For the first time, South Asians have surpassed Chinese as the largest visible minority group in Canada, and both groups now number well over one million people. Blacks comprise the next biggest visible minority population, with just over 780,000 people.

"I feel very connected to India, although I feel equally connected to Canada," says Syerah Virani, editor-in-chief of MyBindi.com, a website for Canada's South Asian community that draws more than a quarter-million visitors each month. "This is my country, this is where I pay my taxes and I derive a lot of benefits. But there is a nostalgia and an identity that is very strongly associated with India."

Born and raised in Mumbai, the 38-year-old Torontonion lived in England during the 1990s before falling in love with Canada on a family vacation and immigrating 10 years ago.

Her 11-year-old daughter defines herself as "a Canadian that was born in England and is being raised by Indian parents" to anyone who cares to ask, Virani says. Music, food, clothing, books and the language spoken by her parents and grandparents link her to a country she's only visited as a tourist.

"My nieces in India take classes in piano and ballet, and my daughter in Canada takes classes in Bollywood," she says. "We are trying to hard in Canada to keep our kids connected to what we left behind, and my nieces in India, on the other hand, are trying so hard to integrate into a country which is here."

Canada is home to people of more than 200 different ethnic origins, and increasing numbers are identifying with multiple ancestries as Virani and her daughter do.

Forty-one per cent of the population claimed a hyphenated ethnic background on



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Syerah Virani, editor of MyBindi.com, a Toronto-based South Asian lifestyle site, the South Asian community is one of the fastest-growing ethnic groups in the country.

the most recent census in 2006, up from 36 per cent a decade earlier, Statistics Canada says. The agency attributes the increase to more intermarriage between ethnic groups and greater "awareness of family heritage."

In fact, mixed unions (marriage and common-law) are growing five times faster than all other couples, accounting for almost four per cent of all couples of 2006, up from three per cent five years earlier.

"I think it's simply due to the fact that there's a greater mixing," says Harry Rosenbaum, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Winnipeg. People generally only have the opportunity to marry those they have social contact with, he says, and they think less about differences when they interact with other groups every day.

Of Canada's 200-plus ethnic origins, 11 groups passed the one million mark in 2006, including French, Scottish, Chinese and Ukrainian, according to Statistics Canada. At the same time, almost one-third of the population - 10.1 million people - selected Canadian as their ethnic origin, either alone or in combination with another, making it the biggest group counted by the census.

When Henry Beh moved to Richmond, B.C., 30 years ago, he had to drive 45 minutes to Vancouver for decent Chinese food. Now, some compare Richmond's dining to Hong Kong's and the suburb is home to one of the most diverse populations in the country, with more than two-thirds of residents (65 per cent) belonging to a visible minority group.

"Supermarkets here sell everything from Filipino food to Thai food to East Indian to Chinese," says Beh, the executive director of the Richmond Chinese Community Society. "If you want to buy rice, curry powder, any type of ice cream, even imported from Thailand, - you name it, you got it."

Canada's diversity is concentrated in its cities, according to Statistics Canada, with nearly all visible minorities (96 per cent) living in metropolitan areas, compared to 68 per cent of the total population.

Immigrants have always gravitated to cities because of better job prospects, says Jeffrey Reitz, a professor of ethnic and immigration studies at the University of Toronto, and that's unlikely to change.

"Once those patterns of migration are established, they tend to perpetuate themselves because people tend to locate in the areas where they have family and friends, or where there are large communities of people from similar origins," he says.

Relations among Canada's diverse population are relatively harmonious, Reitz says, but "I don't think we should necessarily conclude that's because we are somehow more open to diversity than other countries."

Instead, he gives partial credit to the fact that this country hasn't grappled with a troubled history of slavery or illegal immigration as the United States has.

Nevertheless, Beh praises Canada for embracing newcomers.

"You can come from Holland, you can come from Africa or South Asia, and you can keep your own traditions and language," he says.

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