SUBURBANIZING CANADA:
THE 2021 CENSUS

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Introduction

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Canada continues to move to the suburbs, as the 2021 census data shows. This is based on a Statistics Canada analysis on metropolitan (Census Metropolitan Areas, or CMAs) population and change since the 2016 Census. Statistics Canada (Statscan) divides the CMA population into five geographic sectors, including downtown, and four other sectors defined by proximity from downtown (in minutes). This urban core/suburbs categorization differs from the core municipality/suburbs approach, with its much more readily available data. The findings are described in *"Canada's large urban centres continue to grow and spread",* which also has a useful array of tables.

The 0-to-10-minute proximity sector is labeled by Statistics Canada as "urban fringe," which this analysis refers to as "Urban core: Inner Ring" (Note 1, page 11). Downtown and the Inner Ring are called the urban core in this article, with the other three proximity sectors referred to as the suburbs. The 10 to 20 minute proximity is labeled by Statistics Canada as "Near Suburb", 20 to 30 minutes is "Intermediate Suburb" with 30 minutes and over as "Distant Suburb."
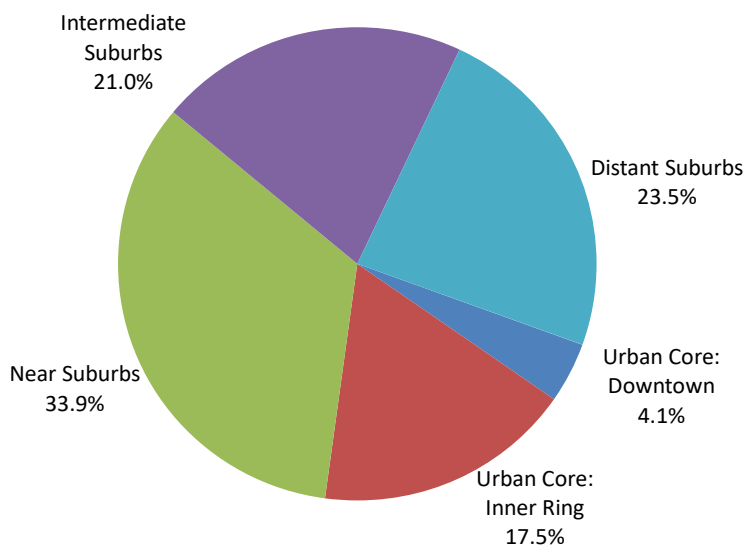
This backgrounder focuses on the 11 CMAs with more than 500,000 residents according to the 2021 census.

Overall Population and Growth 2016-2021

Overall according to the 2021 Census, 78.4 percent of the population of the 11 CMAs is in the suburbs, with 21.6 percent in the urban core. The largest population share is in the Near Suburbs (33.9 percent), followed by the Distant Suburbs (23.5 percent) and the Intermediate Suburbs (21.0 percent). The Inner Ring accounts for 17.5 percent of the population, with Downtown having 4.1 percent (Figure 1, below).

> *Population growth was greater in the suburbs from 2016 census to 2021.*

Population Share: 2021 Census
CMA'S OVER 500,000 POPULATION

Derived from Statistics Canada

Figure 1

Population growth was greater in the suburbs from the 2016 census to 2021. The suburbs captured 83.5 percent of the population growth, 6.5 percent more than its population share of 78.4 percent. The largest gain was in the Distant Suburbs, with a 34.8 percent share, nearly one-half higher than its 2021 share. Downtowns also grew at a higher percentage rate, adding 8.0 percent, nearly double its 2021 population share of 4.1 percent. Because, however, of its smaller base, Downtown had the smallest numeric population increase among the proximity sectors (Figure 2, next page).

Population Growth Share: 2016-2021
CMA'S OVER 500,000 POPULATION

Intermediate Suburbs 18.4%

Distant Suburbs 34.8%

Urban Core: Downtown 8.0%

Urban Core: Inner Ring 8.5%

Near Suburbs 30.2%
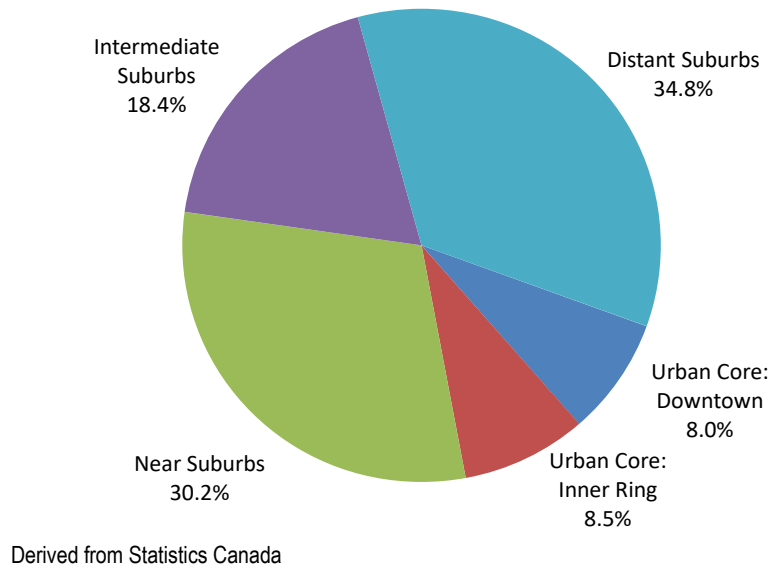
Derived from Statistics Canada

Figure 2

Highlights by CMA

Data for the 11 CMAs with over 500,000 population is summarized by the proximity sectors by population size.

CMA's 2,500,000 & Over

Toronto: In the Toronto CMA, the suburban share of the population is 88.5 percent, while the urban core has 11.5 percent of the population. The largest share lives in the Distant Suburbs (37.5 percent), followed by the Intermediate Suburbs (29.2 percent) and the Near Suburbs (21.8 percent). The smallest share is downtown (4.4 percent), somewhat less than the Inner Ring (7.1 percent). This urban core population share is the smallest among the 11 CMAs.
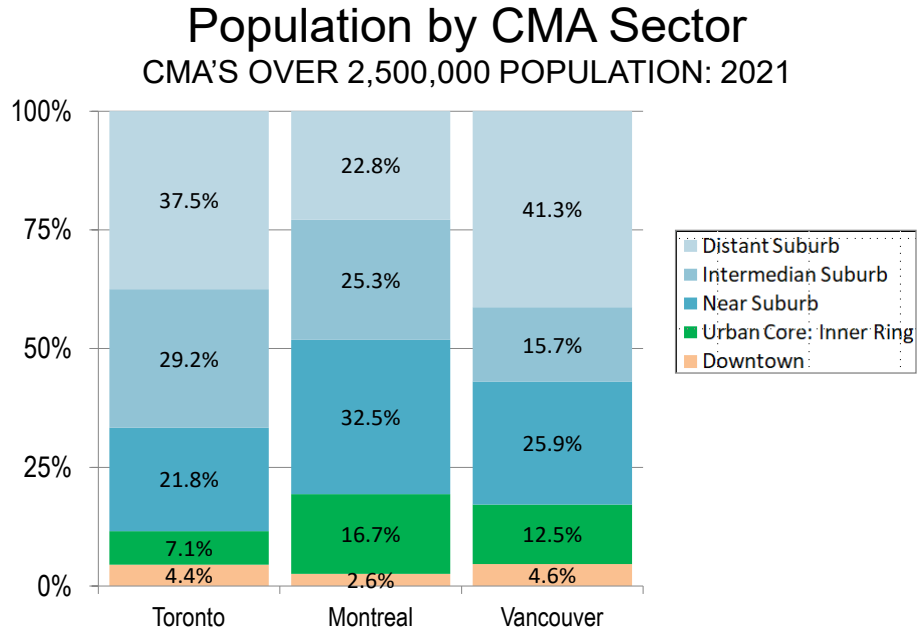
From 2016 to 2021, by far the largest growth was in the Distant Suburbs, which accommodated 73.2 percent of the new population, approximately double its current share of the population. Overall, the suburbs had 83.8 percent of the growth. Downtown had the second strongest growth share, at 13.9 percent. though only 2.3 percent of the growth was in the Urban Core: Inner Ring.

Montreal: The suburban share of the population in the Montreal CMA is 80.7 percent. The largest share is in the Near Suburbs (32.5 percent), followed by the Intermediate Suburbs (25.3 percent) and the Distant Suburbs (22.8 percent). The downtown share was the least (2.2 percent), while the Inner Ring share was much higher (16.7 percent).

The largest growth share was also in the Distant Suburbs, though considerably less than in Toronto, at 34.4 percent. Overall the suburbs accounted for 80.7 percent of the population. Montreal's urban core had more of the growth than its Toronto counterpart, at 19.3 percent, though the distribution was somewhat more balanced (11.4 percent in Downtown and 7.9 percent in the Inner Ring).

" From 2016 to 2021, by far the largest growth was in the Distant Suburbs...

"

Vancouver

suburbs

growing fastest

in Canada

Population by CMA Sector
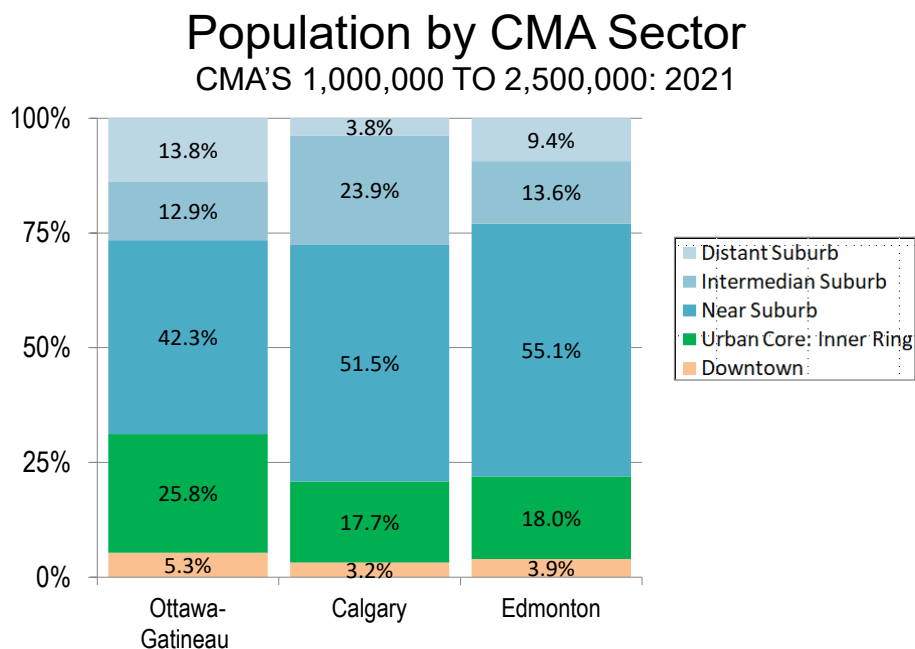### CMA'S OVER 2,500,000 POPULATION: 2021

Derived from Statistics Canada

Figure 3

Vancouver: The suburban share of the population is 82.9 percent in the Vancouver CMA. The largest share is in the Distant Suburbs (41.1 percent), followed by the Near Suburbs (25.9 percent) and the Intermediate Suburbs (15.7 percent). The downtown share of the population is 4.5 percent, and the Inner Ring has a larger 12.5 percent of the population.

Vancouver had the highest share of its growth in the suburbs among the 11 largest CMAs, at 88.6 percent. The Distant Suburbs had by far the largest growth share, at 52.8 percent. The urban core growth share was the lowest among the three largest CMAs, at 11.1 percent.

Data for these CMAs is shown in Figure 3, above, and Tables 1 and 2, page 11.

Population by CMA Sector
CMA'S 1,000,000 TO 2,500,000: 2021

Derived from Statistics Canada

Figure 4

CMAs 1.0 to 2.5 Million Population

Ottawa–Gatineau: The Ottawa-Gatineau CMA has 68.9 percent of its population in the suburbs, with the largest sectoral share in the Near Suburbs (42.3 percent), The Inner Ring has 25.8 percent of the population. The Intermediate Suburbs and Distant Suburbs have 12.9 percent and 13.8 percent of the population respectively, while downtown has 5.3 percent.

Population growth in Ottawa-Gatineau between 2016 to 2021 was 80.1 percent in the suburbs and 19.9 percent in the urban core. The largest growth share was in the Near Suburbs (40.5 percent).

Calgary: The Calgary CMA has 78.8 percent of its population in the suburbs and 21.2 percent in the urban core. The largest population share is 51.5 percent in the Near Suburbs. The Intermediate Suburbs (23.9 percent) and Distant Suburbs (3.8 percent) have somewhat fewer residents. The Inner Ring has 17.7 percent of the population and Downtown has 3.2 percent.

The Suburban population growth share was 86.2 percent in Calgary, with the largest growth in the Intermediate Suburbs (74.9 percent).

Edmonton: The Edmonton CMA has 78.1 percent of its population in the suburbs and 55.1 percent in the Near Suburbs, with 13.6 percent in the Intermediate Suburbs and 9.4 percent in the Distant Suburbs. The Inner Ring has 17.7 percent of the population and Downtown has 3.2 percent.

" Suburban growth dominates all cities

Between 2016 and 2021, Edmonton alone suffered a population loss in the urban core (a minus 5.3 share). The suburbs had 105.3 percent of the CMA growth.

Data for these CMAs is shown in Figure 4 and Tables 1 & 2.

CMAs 0.5 to 1.0 Million Population

Quebec: The Quebec CMA had its largest population share in the Near Suburbs at 44.2 percent, with the suburbs accounting for 70.5 percent of the CMA. The urban core had a 29.5 percent share, concentrated in the Inner Ring, (26.0 percent), while downtown had 3.5 percent. The Intermediate Suburbs and Distant Suburbs had 18.0 percent and 8.3 percent population shares.

The suburbs had 79.8 percent of the population growth, well above their population share. The largest share of the growth was in the Near Suburbs (45.1 percent).

Winnipeg: The Winnipeg CMA had its largest population in the Near Suburbs, at 43.6 percent, while the overall suburban share was 53.3 percent. The urban core had 46.7 percent of the population. The Downtown share was 5.3 percent.
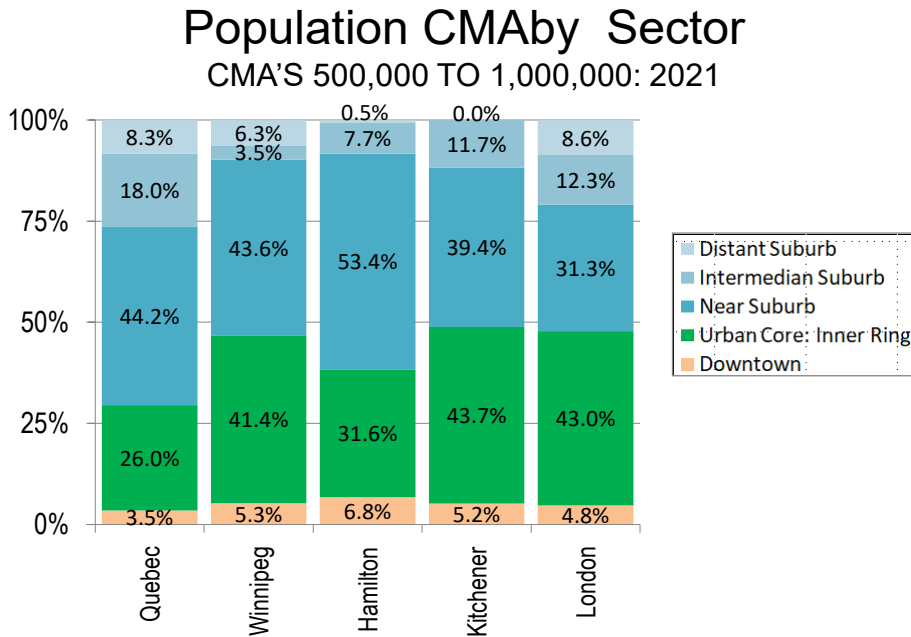
The suburbs dominated Winnipeg's growth, with a 89.1 percent share, while the urban core had 10.9 percent. of the growth from 2016 to 2021 An overwhelming 78.6 percent of the growth was in the Near Suburbs, which is the largest growth share in this category among the 11 CMAs.

Hamilton: The Hamilton CMA has more than one-half of its population in the Near Suburbs (53.4 percent). The overall suburban population share is 61.6 percent. The urban core has 38.4 percent of the population, with 31.6 percent in the Inner Ring and 6.8 percent downtown.

The suburbs had 67.9 percent of the population growth.

Kitchener: The Kitchener CMA has its largest population in the Inner Ring, at a 43.7 percent share, which when combined with the Downtown share of 5.2 percent is a 48.9 percent population share. This is the largest urban core population share among the 11 CMAs with more than 500,000 population. The Near Suburbs have 39.4 percent of the population, and the Intermediate Suburbs 11.7 percent. Statistics Canada reported no Distant Suburb population (indicating that no part of the CMA was 30 minutes or more commuting time from downtown).

Population CMA by Sector
CMA'S 500,000 TO 1,000,000: 2021

Derived from Statistics Canada

Figure 5

The urban core had 46.7 percent of the population growth, the most among the 11 CMAs over 500,000 population. The suburbs captured 53.3 percent of the population growth, with nearly all in the Near Suburbs (46.7 percent).

London: The London CMA became the 11th to reach 500,000 residents between the 2016 and 2021 censuses. The largest share of the London population is in the Inner Ring, at 43.0 percent. Downtown has 4.8 percent of the population and the urban core 47.8 percent. The suburbs account for 52.2 percent of the CMA population, with the largest share in the Near Suburbs (31.3 percent), followed by the Intermediate Suburbs (12.3 percent) and the Distant Suburbs (8.6 percent).

The suburbs had 72.6 percent of the population growth, most of it in the Near Suburbs (50.6 percent). The urban core had 27.4 percent of the growth.

Data for these CMAs is shown in Figure 5, above, and Tables 1 & 2, page 11.

Improving Urban Analysis

"Statistics Canada estimates indicated that the three largest core municipalities lost population in the year ended July 1, 2021.

For years, readily available urban core and suburban data was not available for CMAs. Most analyses were limited to designating the core municipality as the urban core, while the rest of the CMA was the suburbs.

That led to the improbable situation in which, for example, such an analysis of the 2021 census would have the urban core of Vancouver (the municipality) with 25 percent of the CMA population and Calgary (the municipality) with 88 percent of the CMA population. The reality is that some of the core cities have extensive suburban development, such as five of the top six CMAs, with the exception being Vancouver (though even some of the city of Vancouver is in the Near Suburbs according to the Statscan analysis).

In fact, however, metropolitan areas (labour markets) are organisms. Outside their downtown areas, the nature of suburbanization, whether that built in the early 20th century, or yesterday, does not necessarily indicate whether the development is in a core city or outside it.

Professor David L. A. Gordon (Principal Investigator, Canadian Suburbs Research Project) at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, along with his colleagues, may have been the first to develop an alternative population classification system based on function and urban form, without reference to political boundaries. This most recent contribution by Statistics Canada is a welcome addition to this important literature (Note 2, next page).

Meanwhile, the more recently released Statistics Canada estimates indicated that the three largest core municipalities lost population in the year ended July 1, 2021. The city of Toronto lost 0.6 percent of its population, Montreal lost 2.5 percent and Vancouver lost 1.0 percent. These cities, which house Canada's largest central business districts, which could continue to experience lower than historic commuting, with the rise in remote and hybrid work. If this should occur, further decentralization of residential locations could occur.

Table 1

CMA Population Share: 2021 By Statscan Proximity Sector

Census Metropolitan Area (CMA)	Urban Core: Downtown	Urban Core: Inner Ring	Near Suburbs	Intermediate Suburbs	Distant Suburbs	Total Population
Proximity Sector	0 Min.	0-10 Min.	10-20 Min.	20-30 Min.	30+ Min.	
Toronto	4.4%	7.1%	21.8%	29.2%	37.5%	6,202,225
Montreal	2.6%	16.7%	32.5%	25.3%	22.8%	4,291,732
Vancouver	4.6%	12.5%	25.9%	15.7%	41.3%	2,642,825
Ottawa/Gatineau	5.3%	25.8%	42.3%	12.9%	13.8%	1,488,307
Calgary	3.2%	17.7%	51.5%	23.9%	3.8%	1,481,806
Edmonton	3.9%	18.0%	55.1%	13.6%	9.4%	1,418,118
Quebec	3.5%	26.0%	44.2%	18.0%	8.3%	839,311
Winnipeg	5.3%	41.4%	43.6%	3.5%	6.3%	834,678
Hamilton	6.8%	31.6%	53.4%	7.7%	0.5%	785,184
Kitchener	5.2%	43.7%	39.4%	11.7%	0.0%	575,847
London	4.8%	43.0%	31.3%	12.3%	8.6%	543,551

Source: Derived from Statistics Canada data.

Table 2

CMA Population Growth Share: 2016-2021 By Statscan Proximity Sector

Census Metropolitan Area (CMA)	Urban Core: Downtown	Urban Core: Inner Ring	Near Suburbs	Intermediate Suburbs	Distant Suburbs	Total Population
Proximity Sector	0 Min.	0-10 Min.	10-20 Min.	20-30 Min.	30+ Min.	
Toronto	13.9%	2.3%	8.0%	2.6%	73.2%	274,185
Montreal	11.4%	7.9%	24.2%	22.2%	34.4%	187,658
Vancouver	4.7%	6.7%	25.2%	10.7%	52.8%	179,394
Ottawa/Gatineau	5.4%	13.5%	40.5%	24.0%	16.7%	116,731
Calgary	9.1%	4.7%	5.4%	74.9%	5.9%	89,197
Edmonton	-0.6%	-4.6%	62.4%	37.8%	5.0%	96,677
Quebec	-0.7%	21.5%	45.1%	15.4%	18.7%	32,905
Winnipeg	3.2%	7.7%	78.6%	2.1%	8.4%	51,579
Hamilton	12.6%	19.6%	60.2%	7.6%	0.1%	37,639
Kitchener	5.6%	41.1%	47.6%	5.7%	0.0%	51,953
London	5.7%	21.8%	50.6%	8.3%	13.7%	49,482

Source: Derived from Statistics Canada data.

Note 1: The term "Inner Ring" is used for the urban core portion outside Downtown, the term "Urban Fringe" may be more commonly used to denote the edge of urbanization, such as where a "Population Centre" (called Urban Area until 2011 by Statistics Canada) meets rural land.

Note 2: The latest edition of our Demographia City Sector Analysis for the 53 US metropolitan areas with more than 1,000,000 population was recently published (See: All Major Metropolitan Area Growth Outside Urban Core: Latest Year). This, like the Queens University and Statistics Canada approaches defines metropolitan sectors without regard to their geographical governance structure, and the most recent results are similar.

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