




RURAL WELLBEING

Population Factsheet





HIGHLIGHTS

- 87% of Ontario’s municipalities have a population size of fewer than 30k people
- 77% of the rural population live in communities with fewer than 10k people.
- The median population change for Ontario’s rural communities was an increase of 3% since 2016.
- The population density of rural areas is 3 people per square kilometre.

Overview - What do demographic statistics tell us?

Census data allows us to examine how Ontario’s population is changing. This factsheet presents population statistics for rural and urban municipalities in Ontario. We can see which communities are growing or shrinking, and where the population is concentrated. Summary statistics for census divisions and economic regions are presented in the appendices.

Data source: Statistics Canada. 2022. Census Profile. 2021 Census. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. [98-316-X2021001](#).

For interactive maps and data visualizations, please see the [Demographics page](#) of the **Community Wellbeing Dashboard.**




Table 1. Overview of statistics for rural and urban areas.

Geography	2016 Population	2021 Population	Population Change	% Population Change	2021 Population Density
Rural	2,492,645	2,481,753	-10,892	-0.4%	3
Urban	10,956,193	11,742,189	785,995	7%	347
Ontario	13,448,838	14,223,942	775,104	5%	16

Rural – any municipality outside of census metropolitan areas.

Urban – any municipality within a census metropolitan area.

For details about ROI's rural classification, please see our [website](#).



Statistics Canada Definitions

Population density: the number of persons per square kilometre.

Municipality: Census subdivisions, municipalities, and areas treated as municipal for statistical purposes, including unorganized territories and Indigenous reserves and settlements.

Population size

The median population of rural communities is 1,500 people. Urban areas have a median population of 26,505 people.

Approximately half of Ontario's rural municipalities have a population size of fewer than 1k people, but this represents just 3% of the rural population (Table 2). Most of the rural population (67%) lives in communities with 1k-30k people.

While 244 rural municipalities fall within the 1k-30k size category, most of these communities have a population between 1k-10k. This means that 77% of rural communities have a population size of fewer than 10k people.

Only 25% of urban municipalities have a population size of greater than 100,000 people, however, these communities are home to most of Ontario's urban population.

Table 2. Number of municipalities in population size categories.

Size Category	Rural				Urban			
	Number of Municipalities	% of Municipalities	2021 Population	% Population	Number of Municipalities	% of Municipalities	2021 Population	% of Population
Less than 1,000	200	43%	76,902	3%	8	7%	4,000	0%
1K-30K	244	52%	1,674,719	67%	50	46%	729,149	6%
30K-100K	12	3%	626,144	25%	22	20%	1,204,974	10%
Greater than 100K	1	0%	103,988	4%	27	25%	9,804,066	84%
No data	12	3%	-	0%	1	1%	-	0%
Total	469	100%	2,481,753	100%	108	100%	11,742,189	100%

Population Change

For all communities in Ontario, the median population change was a 4% increase (Table 3). Seventy percent of Ontario's communities grew, with a median increase of 7%. Approximately 25% of communities shrank, with a median decrease of -5%.

The median population change for rural communities was an increase of 3%. About 65% of rural communities grew, with a median increase of 7%. Thirty percent of rural communities shrank, with a median decrease of -5%.

Almost 80% of rural communities that shrank are located in Northern Ontario. Approximately half of these communities are Indigenous reserves and settlements. The median population decrease for Indigenous communities that shrank is -12%, which is far greater than the rural median decrease. Since we know that Indigenous communities are younger than the general population, it is likely that population decreases in these areas are a result of people moving to other places.

The median population change for urban communities was an 8% increase. Almost all urban communities grew by a median of 8%.

Table 3. Number of municipalities with a population increase or decrease.

Change	Ontario			Rural			Urban		
	Median change	Count	%	Median change	Count	%	Median change	Count	%
Decrease	-5%	145	25%	-5%	139	30%	-4%	6	6%
Increase	7%	404	70%	7%	303	65%	8%	101	94%
No data	-	28	5%	-	27	6%	-	1	1%
Grand Total	4%	577	100%	3%	469	100%	8%	108	100%

Evidence of pandemic migration?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there were anecdotal reports of an urban migration into rural areas. But the rural population decreased by about 0.4% since 2016. There are almost 11,000 fewer people living in rural municipalities in 2021, according to our classification. It's possible that some rural areas were re-classified as urban because of COVID-19 migration or work patterns. Or maybe the timing of the census did not fully capture the extent of the population change. It's also possible that the "rural" areas people moved to are not classified as rural. For example, people who moved from Toronto to Uxbridge may consider that an urban to rural migration. However, we classify Uxbridge as urban because it is part of the Toronto census metropolitan area. So, there is no change to the urban or rural population in cases like this. There may be a disconnect between what areas people perceive as rural, how organizations define rural, and how this term is reported in the media.

Population Density

Ontario's population density is 16 people per square kilometre (Table 4). Density is generally highest in the south and lowest in the north. Toronto has the highest population density at 4,428, while the density is fewer than 10 in many northern communities.

The overall population density for rural areas is 3 people per square kilometre. Rural density ranges from a low of 0 to a high of 1,371. Eighty-five percent of rural communities have a density of fewer than 100 people. About 44% of rural municipalities have a population density of fewer than 10. Approximately 34% of rural municipalities have a population density between 10-50, and 19% have a density greater than 50.

The urban population density is 347 people per square kilometre, ranging from 2 to 4,428. Almost half of urban communities have a population density of fewer than 100. Just over half of urban municipalities have a density greater than 100 people per kilometre.

Table 4. Population density for rural and urban geographies.

	Rural	Urban	Ontario
2021 Population	2,481,574	11,742,189	14,223,942
Land area (sq. km.)	858,544	33,868	892,412
Population density	3	347	16
Min	0	2	0
Max	1,371	4,428	4,428

Summary

Understanding rural demographics can help policy makers adjust policies or design programs to address important issues. Population statistics can be used to estimate the demand for government services or the need for targeted investment. For example, local leaders can develop programs for immigration, youth retention, or skills development in rural communities with declining populations to address labour force shortages. Further, research organizations can use these facts to design projects that investigate the relationship between rural population change and community wellbeing.



This factsheet was prepared by Danielle Letang, Manager of Data Strategy for the Rural Ontario Institute. Questions about data sources and comments or feedback can be directed to facts@ruralontarioinstitute.ca.

This factsheet complements ROI's [Community Wellbeing Dashboard](#). Factsheets provide insight and analysis of rural facts and trends featured in the dashboard.

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Appendix 1. Summary population statistics for Census Divisions.

Census Division	2016 Population	2021 Population	Change	% Change	Population density
Algoma	114,094	113,777	-317	-0.3	2
Brant	134,943	144,937	9,994	6.9	128
Bruce	68,147	73,396	5,249	7.2	18
Chatham-Kent	102,042	104,316	2,274	2.2	42
Cochrane	81,086	77,963	-3,123	-4.0	1
Dufferin	61,735	66,257	4,522	6.8	45
Durham	645,862	696,992	51,130	7.3	276
Elgin	88,978	94,752	5,774	6.1	50
Essex	398,953	422,860	23,907	5.7	229
Frontenac	150,480	161,780	11,300	7.0	43
Greater Sudbury	161,647	166,128	4,481	2.7	52
Grey	93,830	100,905	7,075	7.0	22
Haldimand-Norfolk	109,652	116,706	7,054	6.0	41
Haliburton	18,062	20,571	2,509	12.2	5
Halton	548,435	596,637	48,202	8.1	618
Hamilton	536,917	569,353	32,436	5.7	509
Hastings	136,445	145,746	9,301	6.4	24
Huron	59,297	61,366	2,069	3.4	18
Kawartha Lakes	75,423	79,247	3,824	4.8	26
Kenora	64,129	66,000	1,871	2.8	0
Lambton	126,638	128,154	1,516	1.2	43
Lanark	68,698	75,760	7,062	9.3	25
Leeds and Grenville	100,527	104,070	3,543	3.4	31
Lennox and Addington	42,883	45,182	2,299	5.1	16
Manitoulin	13,255	13,935	680	4.9	5
Middlesex	455,526	500,563	45,037	9.0	151
Muskoka	60,614	66,674	6,060	9.1	17
Niagara	447,888	477,941	30,053	6.3	258

Nipissing	83,277	84,716	1,439	1.7	5
Northumberland	85,598	89,365	3,767	4.2	47
Ottawa	934,243	1,017,449	83,206	8.2	365
Oxford	110,846	121,781	10,935	9.0	60
Parry Sound	42,824	46,909	4,085	8.7	5
Peel	1,381,739	1,451,022	69,283	4.8	1,163
Perth	76,812	81,565	4,753	5.8	37
Peterborough	138,236	147,681	9,445	6.4	39
Prescott and Russell	89,333	95,639	6,306	6.6	48
Prince Edward	24,735	25,704	969	3.8	24
Rainy River	20,110	19,437	-673	-3.5	1
Renfrew	102,394	106,365	3,971	3.7	14
Simcoe	479,635	533,169	53,534	10.0	111
Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry	113,654	114,637	983	0.9	35
Sudbury	21,546	22,368	822	3.7	1
Thunder Bay	146,048	146,862	814	0.6	1
Timiskaming	32,262	31,424	-838	-2.7	2
Toronto	2,731,571	2,794,356	62,785	2.2	4,428
Waterloo	535,154	587,165	52,011	8.9	429
Wellington	222,726	241,026	18,300	7.6	90
York	1,109,909	1,173,334	63,425	5.4	667

Appendix 2. Summary population statistics for Economic Regions.

Economic Region	2016 Population	2021 Population	Change	% Change	Population density
Hamilton--Niagara Peninsula	1,412,714	1,495,885	83,171	6	210
Kingston--Pembroke	456,937	484,777	27,840	6	23
Kitchener--Waterloo--Barrie	1,299,250	1,427,617	128,367	9	138
London	655,350	717,096	61,746	9	99
Muskoka--Kawarthas	377,933	403,538	25,605	6	24
Northeast / Nord-est	549,991	557,220	7,229	1	2
Northwest / Nord-ouest	230,287	232,299	2,012	1	0
Ottawa	1,306,455	1,407,555	101,100	7	97
Stratford--Bruce Peninsula	298,086	317,232	19,146	6	22
Toronto	6,234,202	6,525,393	291,191	4	941
Windsor--Sarnia	627,633	655,330	27,697	4	90