




# RURAL ONTARIO FACTS

## 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 dashboard](#).**



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

Geography	2016 Population	2021 Population	Population Change	% Population Change	2021 Population Density
<b>Rural</b>	2,492,645	2,481,753	-10,892	-0.4%	3
<b>Urban</b>	10,956,193	11,742,189	785,995	7%	347
<b>Ontario</b>	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%
<b>Total</b>	<b>469</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>2,481,753</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>11,742,189</b>	<b>100%</b>

## 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%
<b>Grand Total</b>	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
<b>2021 Population</b>	2,481,574	11,742,189	14,223,942
<b>Land area (sq. km.)</b>	858,544	33,868	892,412
<b>Population density</b>	3	347	16
<b>Min</b>	0	2	0
<b>Max</b>	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.



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This factsheet is part of the [Rural Ontario Facts](#) series. Each factsheet provides insight and analysis of rural facts and trends featured in the dashboards.

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**Appendix 1.** Summary population statistics for Census Divisions.

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

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

**Appendix 2.** Summary population statistics for Economic Regions.

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