



# REPORT ON THE STATUS OF *B.C. First Nations Languages 2018* Third Edition

## Fact Sheet

This fact sheet represents an overview of the First Peoples' Cultural Council's 2018 Report on the Status of B.C. First Nations Languages.

### **Reporting on B.C. First Nations Languages**

With our third edition of this report, we are pleased to provide an update on the continued progress of communities in their language revitalization work, and to share positive news on recent government initiatives which will significantly enhance ongoing endeavours by B.C.'s Indigenous language champions.

Our 2018 review of the status of First Nations languages in B.C. shows that while the number of language learners continues to increase, there are still serious threats to language vitality with the ongoing loss of aging fluent speakers. There is an urgent need to document and provide substantial support to ensure that each of the 34 unique First Nations languages and 93+ dialects in B.C. are maintained for future generations.

The main variables used for assessing language status are:

- Number of speakers (fluent speakers, semi-speakers and language learners)
- Language education, and
- Number of language resources

This report provides statistics on 177 out of 203 First Nations communities in B.C. The total population that reported to us in these 177 communities was 137,653 (87%).

### **Threats to Vitality**

B.C.'s First Nations languages are facing severe threats to their vitality, which can largely be attributed to the Canadian government's policy of assimilation, which included the residential school system.

### **Current Language Status**

- In 2018, there are 4,132 fluent speakers of First Nations languages in B.C., or 3.0% of the population that reported to FPCC. This is a decrease of 1,157 (from 4.1% to 3.0%) of the population since 2014.
- Just over half (52%) of the fluent speakers are aged 65 or older. The passing of fluent Elders is the main reason why fluent speakers are declining.
- Younger people have few opportunities to learn their languages.
- All communities continue to contend with a lack of language resources (recordings of their language, language curricula, digital archives of their language). This has not changed much since 2014.

### **Language Diversity**

British Columbia is unique within Canada when it comes to Indigenous language diversity. In the context of Canada, B.C.'s languages make up more than 50% of the approximately 61 languages indigenous to this country.

- There are 34 First Nations languages within 7 distinct unrelated language families.
- There are 3 languages once spoken that are now sleeping.
- Languages Indigenous to other parts of Canada are now spoken in B.C. because of migration.

In the rest of Canada, there is much we still don't know about Indigenous languages. For this reason, we have called on the Department of Canadian Heritage to facilitate a review of Indigenous languages, dialects and their names.

## Positive Developments

Despite the challenges, there have been positive changes that are supporting a language shift. There's a growing level of interest in Indigenous language revitalization among B.C.'s First Nations communities and various levels of government. There is also an increasing number of people, especially younger individuals, who are learning and speaking these languages.

## Increase in Learners and Speakers

- There are 13,997 learners in B.C. (10.2% of the population that responded), an increase of 2,135 active learners (9.1%) from 2014. The data also shows that 78.1% of learners are 24 or younger.
- Younger fluent speakers (aged 0-24) are on the rise (117 individuals who reported in 2018 compared to 54 in 2014). New fluent language speakers are being created in many communities through immersion-based learning initiatives at all age levels.

## Increase in Government Support

Indigenous languages are an integral part of Canada's shared history and culture. This year, provincial and federal governments recognized the importance of Indigenous languages with actions to assist the revitalization of these languages across B.C and Canada. For example:

- The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Calls to Action sections 13-17 call on government to acknowledge Indigenous language rights by supporting and funding language revitalization and education.
- In response to the TRC, the federal government, in partnership with Indigenous peoples, is drafting legislation to give Indigenous languages status, legal protection, increased support, and more and longer-term funding for community-based language revitalization initiatives. Engagement sessions with First Nations are in progress across the country.
- In March 2018, the B.C. government made an unprecedented investment of \$50 million over three years to support Indigenous language revitalization efforts across the province.

## What Can Be Done to Revitalize B.C. First Nations Languages?

**Resource development.** More language resources and learning curricula for different ages, which directly support language learning and are easily accessible to community members, must be developed.

- **Language immersion:** Language immersion is the most effective way to build language fluency.
- **Documentation and archiving:** It is essential to continue documenting as much language as possible. FirstVoices.com has currently documented less than 10% of First Nations languages in B.C.
- **Planning:** Comprehensive, strategic language revitalization plans are needed, which respond to a community's needs and vision for its language, and identify the actions needed to achieve that vision.
- **First Nations Leadership:** Chief and council members can lead by learning their languages, enacting language policies, and by seeking out opportunities to collaborate with other communities that share the same language, and with research institutions and language advocacy groups.
- **Government and educational institutions:** Western education models are failing Indigenous people. Changes can be made by designing and funding programs that work towards fluency, increasing teacher training and enacting legislation at all levels to support language revitalization.
- **Individuals:** Consider the role you can play, as an individual, a parent or a community leader, whether you are First Nations or non-First Nations. Find out more about what you can do in B.C. by visiting our websites at [www.fpcc.ca](http://www.fpcc.ca), [www.firstvoices.com](http://www.firstvoices.com), and the award-winning Royal B.C. Museum exhibition, *Our Living Languages*. Advocate with all levels of government to support the TRC Calls to Action for language and consider donating to the First Peoples' Cultural Foundation ([www.fpcf.ca](http://www.fpcf.ca)).

## How was this Information Gathered?

The 2010-2018 data used in this language report derives from our database of Language Needs Assessments (LNAs), which are completed by community organizations each time they apply for funding through the First Peoples' Cultural Council. This data is the most accurate available as it comes directly from First Nations communities and is updated whenever a new Language Needs Assessment is completed.

*“Learning my language has been an amazing journey that I wouldn't trade for any monetary value because it is priceless. My identity is slowly emerging and I'm beginning to feel whole and powerful as a woman of my Nation!”*  
— Yvonne Joe, Nl̓eʔkepmxcín language apprentice