



Geography Classification

Methodology

May 2026

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	PURPOSE	1
2	DATA SOURCES	1
3	CLASSIFICATION VARIABLES	2
4	CLASSIFICATION LOGIC	2
5	CLASSIFICATION CRITERIA SUMMARY.....	4
6	LIMITATIONS	5
7	GLOSSARY.....	6

1 PURPOSE

This document describes the methodology used to assign a community type to each Census Subdivision (CSD) in Canada. The classification is designed to support housing needs assessments and related planning studies by providing a consistent, nationally comparable framework for grouping communities along an urban-to-rural continuum. This is particularly useful when comparing regional, provincial, or national levels.

Seven mutually exclusive categories are produced:

- Major Urban
- Urban
- Small Urban / Town
- Rural — Metro-Adjacent
- Rural — Remote
- Indigenous
- Territorial.

The classification is applied at the 2021 Census Subdivision level using a combination of Statistics Canada administrative type codes, Statistical Area Classification (SAC) types, CMA name matching, and total population.

2 DATA SOURCES

Two Statistics Canada datasets are joined to construct the classification:

Dataset	Files / Source	Key Variables Used
2021 Census geographic attributes	2021_92-151-X.csv (Statistics Canada, catalogue 92-151-X)	CSDUID (DGUID), SACTYPE, POPCTRRATYPE, CMANAME, CSDNAME
2021 Census profile data	census2021.csv (processed Census profile, variable ID 1 = total population) Census2021_names.csv (extracted Census geographies from Census profile data)	DGUID, VALUE (total population) DGUID, GEO (geography label containing CSD type abbreviation)

All datasets are filtered to 7-character DGUIDs to retain CSD-level records and exclude higher-level geographies (e.g., provinces, census divisions). The Census profile is further filtered to Variable ID 1 (total population) to obtain a single population figure per CSD.

3 CLASSIFICATION VARIABLES

The following four variables drive the classification logic:

CSD Type

The CSD type abbreviation is extracted from the GEO geography label using a regular expression that captures the text within parentheses at the end of the label (e.g., “Charlottetown (CY)” yields “CY”). This abbreviation reflects the legal or administrative nature of the subdivision and is the primary variable used to assign a CSD category (Urban Municipal, Rural Municipal, Unorganized, or Indigenous).

SAC Type (SACTYPE)

The Statistical Area Classification (SAC) type describes each CSD’s functional relationship to Census Metropolitan Areas and Census Agglomerations. Values range from 1 (CMA core) to 8 (territorial). SAC Type is used to distinguish urban-influenced from remote rural communities and to identify territorial jurisdictions.

CMA Name (CMANAME)

For Major Urban identification, the Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) name is compared against the CSD name using a case-insensitive string match. A positive match (combined with SAC Type 1 and an Urban Municipal or eligible Rural-Municipal CSD type) identifies the primary urban area within a CMA.

Total Population (VALUE)

Total population (Census Profile variable ID 1) is used to distinguish Urban communities (population $\geq 10,000$) from Small Urban / Town communities (population $< 10,000$) where CSD type alone does not determine the category.

4 CLASSIFICATION LOGIC

The classification is applied in two sequential steps. First, each CSD is assigned a broad CSD Category based on its CSD type. Second, a final Community Type is derived by evaluating a prioritised set of conditional rules against the CSD Category, SAC Type, CMA name match, and population. Rules are evaluated in the order listed below; a CSD is assigned to the first category whose criteria it meets.

Step 1: CSD Category

Each CSD is assigned to one of four intermediate categories:

- **Urban Municipal:**
CSD types associated with incorporated urban municipalities (e.g., cities, towns, villages).
- **Rural Municipal:**
CSD types associated with rural or regional municipal structures (e.g., rural municipalities, counties, districts).

- **Unorganized:**
CSD types representing unincorporated or unorganized territories with no formal local government.
- **Indigenous:**
CSD types representing First Nations reserves, self-governing territories, and other Indigenous land bases. A supplementary string-detection step scans the GEO label for keywords (e.g., “Indian reserve,” “Terre inuite”) to capture any records where the CSD type extraction may have failed.

Certain Rural-Municipal CSD types – specifically Regional Government Municipalities (RGMs), Metropolitan Regional Municipalities (MRMs), District Municipalities (DMs), and Special Municipalities (SMs) – exhibit functional characteristics more consistent with urban governance and are treated as eligible for Urban classification in Step 2. These types are referred to collectively as “urban-eligible rural” types.

Step 2: Community Type

Community Type rules are evaluated in the following priority order. The first matching rule determines the final classification.

- **Indigenous:**
CSD Category is Indigenous (assigned in Step 1, including GEO-string fallback).
Evaluated first to ensure all Indigenous lands are captured before any other rule.
- **Territorial:**
SAC Type equals 8, indicating a territorial jurisdiction (Yukon, Northwest Territories, or Nunavut).
- **Major Urban:**
CSD is Urban Municipal or urban-eligible rural, SAC Type is 1, and the CSD name matches the CMA name. Identifies the principal city of a Census Metropolitan Area.
- **Urban:**
CSD is Urban Municipal or urban-eligible rural, SAC Type is 1, 2, or 3, and total population is at least 10,000. Captures substantial incorporated communities within urban influence zones.
- **Small Urban / Town:**
CSD Category is Urban Municipal but the above Urban thresholds are not met. Captures smaller incorporated places regardless of their metropolitan relationship.
- **Rural – Metro-Adjacent:**
SAC Type is 1, 2, 3, or 4, indicating at least moderate metropolitan influence. Applies to all remaining CSDs not already classified.
- **Rural – Remote:**
All remaining CSDs. Applies to communities with weak or no metropolitan influence, as well as unorganized territories.

5 CLASSIFICATION CRITERIA SUMMARY

The table below summarises the criteria for each community type. Criteria are applied in the order presented; each CSD is assigned to the first category whose conditions are fully satisfied.

Table 1: Community type classification criteria for Canadian Census Subdivisions (2021 Census)

Category	CSD Type(s)	SAC Type	Population	Notes
Major Urban	City (CY) Town (T) Township and royalty (TV) City (C/CV) Village (V/VL) Municipality (MU/M/MÉ) Improvement district (IM) also select Rural- Municipal types (RGM, MRM, DM, SM)	1 (CMA core)	Any	CSD name must match the CMA name (case- insensitive). This identifies the principal city within a CMA
Urban	All Urban Municipal types also select Rural- Municipal types (RGM, MRM, DM, SM)	1, 2, or 3 (CMA / CA / strong MIZ)	≥ 10,000	Incorporated or structurally urban- eligible; situated within an urban influence zone
Small Urban / Town	All Urban Municipal types (CY, T, TV, C, CV, V, VL, MU, M, MÉ, IM)	Any	< 10,000 (or any, after Major Urban / Urban fail to match)	Incorporated places with urban form but below the threshold for Urban classification
Rural – Metro- Adjacent	Rural Municipal types (RM, RMU, P, PE, TP, CT, CU, MD, DM, SC, RCR, FD, SA, SV, RV, RGM, MRM, SM, CC, CG, SG, GR)	1, 2, 3, or 4 (CMA / CA / strong or moderate MIZ)	Any	Rural governance structure with meaningful commuting links or proximity to an urban centre; not classified as Indigenous or Urban
Rural – Remote	Any remaining CSD types not captured above	5 or 6 (weak MIZ or no MIZ)	Any	Catch-all for rural geographies with minimal urban influence; includes unincorporated and unorganized territory
Indigenous	Indian reserve (IRI) Settlement- établissement (S-É) Terres Réservées Nisga'a, Tla'amin, Tsawwassen,	Any	Any	Assigned first, before any other rule; GEO-string fallback captures reserves/settlements where CSD type extraction may fail

Category	CSD Type(s)	SAC Type	Population	Notes
	Teslin and other self-governing forms (TK, TC, VC, VK, TI, TWL, TAL, NL, TL, IGD) also detected via GEO string keywords			
Territorial	Any CSD type within Yukon, Northwest Territories, or Nunavut	8 (Territory)	Any	Applied after Indigenous check; all non-Indigenous CSDs in territorial jurisdictions

Note on POPCTRRATYPE: This Statistics Canada variable (population centre and rural area type) was reviewed but is not used as a primary classifier. At the CSD level, population centre designations can be inconsistent with administrative boundaries, particularly for large cities and rural municipalities with mixed land use. SAC Type and CSD type are considered more reliable indicators of urban/rural character for this purpose.

Note on priority ordering: The sequential application of rules means that a CSD's administrative type takes precedence over population and metropolitan influence. In practice, this primarily affects a small number of rural-type CSDs within CMA boundaries (e.g., large district municipalities) that would otherwise qualify as Urban but are appropriately classified as Rural — Metro-Adjacent given their governance structure.

6 LIMITATIONS

The classification relies entirely on 2021 Census data. CSD boundaries, administrative types, and SAC designations reflect conditions at the time of that census and will not capture municipal amalgamations, boundary revisions, or reclassifications that have occurred since. Communities that have grown or declined substantially since 2021 (particularly, those near the 10,000-population threshold used to distinguish Urban from Small Urban / Town) may be assigned a category that no longer reflects their current character. The classification should be updated when a new census cycle makes revised geographic attributes available.

The seven-category structure imposes discrete boundaries on what is in practice a continuum of settlement types. A small incorporated town situated just outside a Census Agglomeration boundary, for example, will be classified as Small Urban / Town rather than Rural – Metro-Adjacent, even if its functional relationship to surrounding rural areas is stronger than its urban form suggests. Similarly, unincorporated communities with established commercial and service functions may be assigned to Rural – Remote solely on the basis of their lack of formal municipal status. These edge cases are an inherent consequence of rule-based classification and should be considered when interpreting results for individual communities.

The CMA name-matching step used to identify Major Urban communities depends on an exact (case-insensitive) string match between the CSD name and the CMA name. Where these do not correspond (e.g., where the principal city carries a name distinct from the CMA designation, or

where the CMA name has changed), the community will not be identified as Major Urban and will instead be assigned to the Urban category. Any such cases should be reviewed and corrected manually if accurate Major Urban identification is required for a given application.

The Indigenous category is defined by administrative CSD type and GEO-string keywords, which means it reflects the formal land base recognition of a community rather than the Indigenous character of its population. CSDs with a predominantly Indigenous population but without a corresponding administrative designation (such as off-reserve urban Indigenous communities or municipalities with substantial First Nations membership) will not be classified as Indigenous under this framework. The category should therefore be understood as identifying Indigenous land bases, not Indigenous communities in a broader demographic or cultural sense.

Although the classification is designed to support housing needs assessments across a range of community types, it was developed and tested primarily in the context of smaller municipalities in Atlantic Canada. Its performance across the full range of Canadian CSDs (including large metropolitan fringe communities, northern Indigenous communities with atypical administrative structures, and CSDs in Quebec with distinctive municipal forms) has not been systematically validated. Users applying the classification in other regional contexts should review outputs for plausibility before use.

7 GLOSSARY

Term / Code	Definition
CSD	Census Subdivision is the basic unit of local government or its equivalent in Canada, used as the primary geographic unit in this classification.
DGUID	Dissemination Geo Unique Identifier is Statistics Canada's standard numerical identifier. For CSDs it is 7-digits long.
CSD Type	A two-to-three letter abbreviation embedded in the Census geography label (e.g., CY = City, IRI = Indian reserve) that describes the legal or administrative nature of the CSD.
SAC Type (SACTYPE)	Statistical Area Classification type is a Statistics Canada variable (1–8) that characterises a CSD's relationship to Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs), Census Agglomerations (CAs), and metropolitan influence zones (MIZ). Values 1–3 indicate urban influence; 4 moderate; 5–6 weak or none; 8 territorial.
CMA	Census Metropolitan Area is an urban core of 100,000+ population and surrounding municipalities with high commuting integration (SAC Type 1).
CA	Census Agglomeration is an urban core of 10,000–99,999 with surrounding commuting zone (SAC Types 2–3).
MIZ	Metropolitan Influence Zones are areas outside CMAs/CAs classified by the share of residents commuting to a CMA/CA: Strong (SAC 3), Moderate (SAC 4), Weak (SAC 5), or No MIZ (SAC 6).
POPCTRRATYPE	Population Centre and Rural Area type is a Statistics Canada variable indicating whether a CSD is urban, rural, or a population centre. Not used as a primary classifier in this methodology due to reliability concerns at the CSD level.