Canadian Council on Social Development
Conseil canadien de développement social

Long Form Census Toolkit

Developed by:
The Canadian Council on Social Development's
Community Social Data Strategy

Get Your Voice Heard

The Grassroots Level

The Government of Canada's decision to scrap the mandatory Census long form was a political –not a technical– decision that will affect how we understand and help serve our communities. We need to keep this debate alive and make sure that the Federal Government and the opposition is reminded of how important this data is to the work that you do. The voices of community partners and the business community will be instrumental in informing our Federal decision makers so that this decision can be reversed.

This tool kit provides you with a short explanation of the Census, the proposed changes and key arguments you may want to use when voicing your opposition to the Government's recent decision.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact us at: information@csds-sacass.ca

In a Nutshell

Short vs. Long Form Census

Census has been traditionally comprised of two census forms: a short and a long form. The completion of both forms is mandatory. The short form is sent to 100% of Canadians whereas the long form is sent to one in five Canadians (20% sample) and extrapolated to the rest of the population. The long census form has been around for 35 years and is the one most reliable data sources on ethnicity, immigrant status, income, education, labour force, housing and non-paid work to name a few.

The Proposed Change and Why this is a Bad Decision

The proposed National Household Survey will be sent to 1 in 3 Canadians. At first glance it may seem like the proposed survey would increase the sampling size.

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However, the voluntary nature of the survey will have negative effects on the accuracy of the data. Rosemary Bender, Director General of the social and demographic statistics branch acknowledged “that we may not get the same level of detail as that of the census”.

Certain groups of Canadians might be more inclined not to fill out the form, skewing the results. Minority groups, immigrants, aboriginals and the very poor and high income earners will not voluntarily complete the new form. Additionally, variations in sampling in different jurisdictions might render data dissemination at smaller geography levels impossible (such as Wards, Service Delivery Areas, Census Tracts or Dissemination Areas).

Why is the government doing this?

Since the Government’s announcement, there has been much speculation as to the rationale for cancelling this critically important tool. For its part, the Government cites wide spread privacy concerns from Canadians with respect to the level of information, even indicating - without evidence - that it had received significant privacy complaints over the Long Form. When the evidence did not support the privacy issue, the Government made it about something more ideological, “it is intrusive and coercive,” claimed Minister of Industry, Tony Clement and the PMO.

Others have pointed to the fact that due to its voluntary nature, the data will paint a deeply skewed picture of Canada. The proposed voluntary survey will not capture a comprehensive picture of the country.

So what will we be left with? A skewed picture of mostly middle class Canadians. We’ll look less diverse, less poor, ultimately less in need of government support. And we need not kid ourselves here, the Census directs government transfers and investments to key programs, by legislation.

Paint your own picture, silence the expert voices who would challenge government policy, control the message and fundamentally change the country.

It is clear that the government did not expect the wide spread push back that they have received during one of the hottest summers on record, on something as bland as a census. But we get it, we know how important this is, it’s ours, about us, for us and for our future.

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Writing your Letter

Although you are addressing the letter to the Prime Minister and the Minister of Industry, it is important that your concerns are heard by the opposition and others who might also be lobbying for the reinstatement of the mandatory long form of the Census. Provincial and Municipal politicians and other partners to your organization should also be made of aware that this decision negatively impacts your organization *and the work you do* so that they can double their efforts to reverse this decision.

Recipients

The Right Honourable Stephen Harper, P.C., M.P.
Prime Minister of Canada

The Honourable Tony Clement
Minister of Industry
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Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0H5
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Email: minister.industry@ic.gc.ca

Carbon copy (CC)

- Leaders of the opposition
- MPs for their jurisdiction
- Premiers
- Chair and Member of Regional Council
- Mayor and Local Councilors
- Copy of Editor of Local and or National Newspaper
- Academic Partners
- Funders
- Parent Organization/Head Office (E.G. UW Canada)

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Content & Arguments

Benefits of the Census

- Most of us know the importance of the Census, and for the most part, people are willing (if not ecstatic) to complete the short and long forms of the Census every 5 years because we get that the information is used to plan for virtually everything in our lives.
- The long form of the Census is not so much about who people are, but how people are doing. For instance, the question about the number of rooms - including bedrooms - helps to assess whether families are living in over crowded, overly expensive and in-need of repair dwellings. Combined with income information and shelter costs, an assessment can be made about how many families in a given community are struggling, and how many families are doing just fine. This makes planning for current and future housing needs easier
- The government continues to talk about "counting bathrooms", but in fact, the long form of the Census asks respondents to count the number of rooms, excluding "bathrooms, halls, vestibules and rooms used solely for business purposes" {#53, H3. (a)}
- Labour force questions help to assess the economic vitality of communities, whether people are employed at the level of their educational backgrounds and whether certain types of people – like women and immigrants - are underemployed, or employed in low paying jobs. The Labour Force questions have also historically aided the federal government in planning for Employment Insurance benefits, the Old Age Security and Canada Pension Plan. Provincial ministries use this information to guide the allocation of funding and other resources to education and training programs
- The mode of travel to work helps us understand the live – work connection within communities. Do people travel to other communities for work? If so, how might these workers be enticed to work closer to home – what kind of jobs would keep people from commuting? How will housing and transportation infrastructure within communities be planned to make it easier for live – work arrangements? Finally, for those that must commute, how do transportation planners design highways and public transit, and what are the environmental impacts of the various transportation models?

Statistical Arguments

<u>More responses do not mean better data</u>

The substitute 30% sample survey, which is now being proposed to be completely voluntary on the part of participants, is very likely to be biased. Voluntary surveys by

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their nature of being non-compulsory are more likely to be answered by persons more able to do so.

Conversely, certain groups of Canadians might be more inclined not to fill out the form, skewing the results. For example, already many aboriginals living on reserves have balked at filling out the census. Therefore there will be a bias towards unknown demographic groups such as lower income Canadians, those with less fluency in

English or French, recent immigrants, and/or those without stable housing etc. Bias also includes geographic bias in not knowing if areas within a larger geography truly represent the uniqueness of people living in those smaller areas. This makes such results unreliable for use in understanding the characteristics of these sub-groups for planning purposes.

A higher response rate would not compensate for such bias since there is no difference between two samples (one small and the other very large) if both samples are over-represented to begin with. There is an incomplete picture. The people who refuse to respond might be different from the people who are willing to respond.

Finally, the biases introduced by a voluntary survey and the likelihood that the response rate will be much lower, will not make it a comparable and effective substitute. Volunteer surveys typically have on average 20% response rates.

Changing the methodology results in an inability to compare with previous Census long form data

The move towards a voluntary survey cannot be statistically compared to previous ones that were compulsory in nature due to response bias and change in methodology.

Weighting and Imputation to estimate total populations, are not statistically reliable

Without the data from the long form part of the Census, it will be extremely difficult and even likely impossible to properly correct for any biases since there will be no systematic and effective enumeration of Canadians by income, immigration, housing status etc. Researchers and policy makers will be in an ironic situation, because the Census is the basis for all other surveys. The Census long form is used to correct for response bias, so future survey findings will not be statistically reliable.

The Privacy "argument"

Statistics Canada goes through infinite lengths and expense to maintain confidentiality and the success of these efforts was provided as evidence by the Privacy Commissioner of Canada – only 3 privacy complaints in 10 years from Census years 1996 - 2006

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The Coerciveness-Intrusiveness "argument"

- The short-form census is still mandatory.
- The short-form census asks personal ("intrusive") questions such as marital status.
- The maximum penalty for non-compliance with the short-form is... jail time.

If the problem is the threat of jail time, then remove the threat!

Consultation

The Community Social Data Strategy (CSDS), its lead representatives at the municipal and community partner level, have participated in many rounds of consultation with Statistics Canada and provided a joint submission with members of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities Quality of Life Reporting System and the Regional Information Systems Working Group of Ontario (add link).

Not ONCE was the "voluntary option" at the table.

Consultations are an essential component in the census planning process to ensure that . Consultation for the 2011 Census has been ongoing since 2007 with:

- federal government departments and agencies
- provincial and territorial government departments
- local governments
- the general public
- libraries
- academia
- special interest groups
- the private sector
- licensed distributors of census data

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Additional Resources

Sample letter (courtesy of OMSSA)

Dear Minister Clement:

As a INSERT YOUR AREA OF WORK, we know first-hand the importance of the mandatory long-form census questionnaire.

In the past, data from the long-form questionnaire have been used to inform program and policy decisions in our community. The data allow us to ensure that program investments - often with federal money - are targeted toward the populations who need them the most. Moreover, comparing past data with more recent numbers allows us to see whether programs are working or whether adjustments need to be made, as well as shared municipal/federal and municipal/provincial programs, make a positive impact and provide the best return on investment.

(Insert specific local example here, or delete this line)

I recognize that your government is proposing changes that would see the long-form questionnaire distributed to more homes across the country, but completing it becomes voluntary. The voluntary nature of the new form will compromise the quality of the data and will not accurately reflect the socio-economic or population diversity demographics that INSERT INDUSTRY AREA (i.e. community organizations, businesses,) use to shape their programs. By changing the form, long-term comparisons of census data which is vital to trend analysis and planning will no longer be possible.

I urge you and your government to reconsider the decision to eliminate the mandatory long-term census questionnaire in 2011 and beyond. The quality of municipal policies and programs depends on this data.

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See who else opposes this decision (other sample letters when available):
http://datalibre.ca/census-watch/

Major Federal Legislative Census Requirements
http://datalibre.ca/2010/07/19/major-federal-legislative-census-requirements/

Uses of Census Long-Form data – Question Justification
http://datalibre.ca/2010/07/19/uses-of-census-long-form-data-question-justification/

Links to Articles & Blogs of Note:

http://www.progressive-economics.ca/2010/07/22/after-the-fall-whats-next-for-the-census/

http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/harpers-census-push-months-in-the-making/article1651526/

http://www.montrealgazette.com/news/canada/StatisCan+Compromise+census+battle/3323368/story.html

http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/spector-vision/the-one-and-only-census-question/article1651604/

The Canadian Council on Social Development is Canada's leading authority in social policy. The CCSD leads the **Community Social Data Strategy** a pan Canadian program that enables municipalities and community based organizations to access data from Statistics Canada in order to better understand and respond to understand the social and economic trends within their individual communities. The toolkit can be found at www.ccsd.ca

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