

RESOLVING THE CENSUS DEBATE

Welcoming the Changes Announced on August 11th

The National Statistics Council, the senior, external advisory group appointed by the government of Canada to advise the Chief Statistician, has noted the Government's announcement that it intends "to remove threats of jail time for persons refusing to fill out the census" and its recognition that the voluntary National Household Survey will not meet the requirements for robust and accurate small-area data (e.g. data related to the use of Canada's Official Languages) that can only be provided through a mandatory instrument.

The Council supports these developments, and is gratified that the government has acted in a manner consistent with suggestions about removing jail time outlined in the Council's July 25th statement *Seeking Solutions*. International experience with mandatory censuses and surveys has shown that success can be achieved without the threat of jail.

Resolving the Issues by Listening to Canadians

While the initial decision of the government was taken without public consultation, the debate and discussion since the decision was announced have been illuminating. Many groups have explained the importance of the long form for their activities. They have brought to the attention of the government many facts that the government may not have known given the initial lack of consultation.

The public debate and the testimony at the Standing Committee, as well as the information released by the government yesterday in response to the order of the Standing Committee, have made the situation clearer and have demonstrated that:

- All expert statistical advice, as well as the results of the recent U.S. survey experiment, concurs that a voluntary survey will not be able to fulfill the fundamental needs of a national statistical system in terms of accurate data for small-area needs, or for the benchmarking needed to ensure that other Statistics Canada surveys accurately represent the Canadian population.
- The cost of changing the long-form part of the census into a survey is substantial -- \$30 million or more -- while yielding less accurate or usable information.
- While there has been recent discussion that small-area data users such as public health planners, voluntary associations, towns, highway and transportation designers, and many more should pay for their own surveys instead of relying on the census, this is not possible. For the same reason, non-response bias, that a voluntary replacement for the long-form census will not yield accurate results with a 50% - 70% response rate, private surveys will be totally unacceptable with their 10% - 15% response rates. (Again, their low response rates can be adjusted to be more accurate reflections of the whole population, but that requires the benchmarking from the long-form which will no longer be available.)

The Government's Announcement Can be a Path to a Widely-embraced Resolution

The government's announcements provide a welcome point of departure for an urgently needed fresh look at the issues and the crafting of additional initiatives that will protect and enhance the Canadian statistical system, ensures privacy, serves the Canadian public better, and reduces costs.

In the short term, we believe that there is an opportunity by making the National Household Survey compulsory to:

- Save significant sums of money.
- Reduce respondent burden on Canadians as the number of people asked to complete the long-form will be reduced from 30% of the population to 20%.
- Provide the accurate benchmarking information needed to ensure that Stats Can and other data users – public, voluntary or private – can gather subsequent information.
- Give vital information needed for small area or neighbourhood uses, including housing, health and transportation planning.

The National Statistics Council is eager to work with the government and with Statistics Canada on an urgent basis to achieve these important short-term goals.

Looking to the Future

The National Statistics Council believes that there are important ways in which the census and the statistical system can be improved for all Canadians. While these are not subject to the same time pressure as the current decisions about census content and form, they should be addressed in the coming year.

The National Statistics Council recommends that over the next year:

1. Statistics Canada consult widely and examine the process for deciding what questions merit inclusion in each census. While a suggested set of criteria was set out in the Council's *Seeking Solutions*, the important goal is to make the process transparent and the need clearly demonstrable.
2. The opportunity afforded by amending the Statistics Act be used to include provisions related to the UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, a code adopted by the UN and to which Canada has already formally adhered.
3. Statistics Canada examine the respondent burden placed on Canada's farmers by the Census of Agriculture and other agricultural surveys from Statistics Canada. This review would look at collection techniques, search for ways to reduce the volume of questions, and consult with farmers about their need for data.

The National Statistics Council stands ready to assist the Minister and Government in using the recent focus of public interest in the census to enhance Canada's system of national statistics so that it meets the contemporary and emerging needs of Canadians.

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