

## Reinstate the Canadian Mandatory Long-Form Census

In April 2014, Statistics Canada announced that it is gearing up for the 2016 Canadian Census. As in 2011, there will be a short, mandatory census questionnaire for all Canadians, and a voluntary household survey for 1 in 3 households.

In 2010 over the objections of a very broad sector of society, the federal government abolished the mandatory long-form census questionnaire, in favour of a voluntary National Household Survey. The impetus for the change was reported to be concern for the privacy of individuals that submit the questionnaire. However, there are no indications that any census information gathered had been compromised nor individuals' privacy put at risk. It has been reported that security of the data, particularly concerning personal privacy, is very high.

During 2014, Statistics Canada has been releasing information based on the census conducted without this tool. This has resulted in a storm of questions about the reliability of the data collected especially when compared with previous census data. According to a Canadian Press report, the agency (Statistics Canada) viewed the results as good for its first voluntary survey, but noted that the numbers were less reliable when focusing on areas with fewer than 25,000 people. In fact while Statistics Canada did increase the number of households that received the survey (1 in 3 from 1 in 5), the response rate was only 68% as opposed to the 94% rate when submitting data was mandatory.

When the agency released its data focused on languages, Statistics Canada posted a warning in the release which said: *"Data users are advised to exercise caution when evaluating trends related to mother tongue and home language that compare 2011 census data to those of previous census'."*

Reasons for the re-instatement of Canada's mandatory long-form census include:

Long-form data are used by businesses, provinces and municipalities, economists, urban and community researchers, policy analysts, sociologists, and other scholars in the humanities and social sciences (including geographers and historians). Religious and ethnic groups are also users. They all rely on the mandatory long form census for solidly representative and accurate data – especially when data are disaggregated to community or minority-group levels. Whatever the unit of analysis, an accurate statistical portrait of the population – one that allows for cross-tabulation – is required. This cannot be provided by the voluntary NHS because of the likely bias due to the under-representation of specific groups. Aboriginal people, recent immigrants, low-income families, and perhaps even busy professionals may fail to respond to the survey.

The loss of comparable, longitudinal, long-form data seriously impairs our ability to monitor change in the social indicators that inform policies and programs related to immigrants, visible minorities, the poor, ethnic groups, Aboriginal peoples, disabled people, or women (e.g. the value of unpaid work in the home). Similarly, it makes it impossible to track changes in educational attainment, labour force participation, type of employment, income (by source), religious affiliation, language use, or migration and commuting patterns. In the absence of accurate, representative, and directly comparable longitudinal data, we will no longer be able to measure the effectiveness of our social programs and economic policies.

Municipalities (including large cities) and even provinces cannot gather such high quality, comprehensive, and reliable or truly representative data themselves. Not only would their costs be prohibitive but, unlike the federal government, they cannot make their surveys mandatory. With respect to the gathering of data, the best gift the federal government can give to our smaller jurisdictions and to Canadian citizens in general is access to high-quality data derived from a mandatory long-form census sent to one household in five.

When we are still climbing out of a recession and relying heavily on immigration for population and labour force growth, we cannot afford to jeopardize our ability to gather high quality, accurately representative data on a range of social and economic indicators that measure adaptation by immigrant groups.

The federal government's decision to cancel the mandatory long-form census (2b) and to replace it with the voluntary National Household Survey effectively undermines its commitment to research excellence and innovation because we need:

- data – based on a truly representative sample – that is vital to education (in a range of disciplines), to research in the social sciences, as well as to the analysis that informs policy and advocacy as well as decision-making in both public and private sectors
- data that are representative, that one can disaggregate to small geographic units, age categories, and relatively small minorities

- data that are strictly comparable to those of previous censuses which allow longitudinal analysis and the measurement of trends in socioeconomic indicators over decades
- the ability to produce an accurate portrait of our country, Canada, that provides the benchmarks against which other surveys can measure the adequacy of their samples
- the data required to measure our standing on the range of social policy indicators (e.g. poverty) used for international comparisons

At a time when Statistics Canada is making its data and analysis freely available to scholars, policy analysts, business, and citizens to encourage research and innovation, returning to a mandatory Long Form Census Questionnaire offers numerous advantages.

### **Recommendation**

That the federal government reinstate the mandatory long-form census questionnaire in the 2016 census.