

# Community Dispatch

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## CHANGES TO 2011 CENSUS THREATEN COMMUNITY DATA

Community Development Halton is astonished and deeply concerned about the recent decision of the Federal Government to discontinue the mandatory long-form questionnaire for the 2011 Census in favour of a voluntary National Household Survey (NHS).

As a local community development and research organization, we know first-hand the importance of data emanating from the mandatory long-form Census questionnaire in our work to enhance the quality of life of people as they live and work in local communities. It is the basis for foundational documents used throughout our community, such as CDH's Social Profile reports and Community Lens series that allow community organizations to evolve their services and activities to reflect their communities changing population.

The Government of Canada's decision to scrap the mandatory long-form Census was a political – not a technical – decision that will affect how we understand and help serve our communities. We need vigorous debate on the wisdom of these changes and the impact of this decision on life in community. The Federal Government and the opposition must be reminded of how important this data is to the work that you do. Your voice, along with that of other community partners, including business, will be instrumental in encouraging our Federal representatives to review the evidence and ultimately rescind their decision.

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.

Census data provides some of the most reliable socio-demographic data at the neighbourhood level. It cannot be replaced by a voluntary survey such as the NHS. In our experience over many decades in our local communities, we have never been made aware that local citizens resented the time needed to respond to the survey nor that they believed their privacy was being invaded. Quite to the contrary, they see it as a responsibility of citizenship. Grass-root community groups have been pleased and grateful to have access to quality data that provide insights on their communities so that as citizens they can engage in responsible and informed decision making on local issues.

The Federal government is proposing changes that would see a long-form questionnaire (NHS) distributed to more homes across the country, but completing it becomes voluntary. Voluntary surveys by their nature of being non-compulsory are more likely to be answered by persons more able to do so. Certain groups of Canadians might be more

inclined not to fill out the form, biasing the results. For example, already many aboriginals living on reserves have balked at filling out the Census. Therefore there will be a bias towards 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.

By changing the form, long-term comparisons of Census data, which are vital to trend analysis and planning, will no longer be possible. Census data is a critical building block of public and community programs as they are informed by local demographics. Census data provides quality information to guide community dialogue and citizen engagement on important social and economic issues facing a community.

### **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 source of the most reliable data 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 Unwise 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.

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 at Statistics Canada 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, colouring 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 levels of geography impossible (such as Wards, Service Delivery Areas, Census Tracts or Dissemination Areas). Geography is important to work in neighbourhoods and communities.

#### ***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 questionnaire. When the evidence did not support the privacy issue, as demonstrated by the Privacy Commissioner, the Government claimed the long-form census “...is intrusive and coercive,” as stated by the Minister of Industry, Tony Clement.

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 an accurate and comprehensive picture of the country.

So what will we be left with? A biased 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 innocuous as a census. But we know how important quality data based on the Census is; it's ours, about us, for us and for our future.

### Taking Action

As stated earlier, we need to keep this debate alive and make sure that the Federal Government and the opposition parties are 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 will be reversed. Below are some resources that can assist you in taking action. Write a letter to the Federal

government and opposition leaders, making sure to copy your local MP and CDH as well. Meet with your local MP to discuss the importance of good quality data for the work you do in community. In particular, CDH supports the recommendations of the National Statistics Council to a) reinstate the 2011 mandatory long-form questionnaire as is for this cycle; b) engage in a formal consultation process to examine Census questions, beginning with the 2016 Census, and; c) adjust penalties for non-compliance by eliminating the threat of a jail sentence for not filling out a census form.

### Resources

1. Canadian Council on Social Development: [Long Form Census Toolkit](#). 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.
2. Census Watch - <http://datalibre.ca/census-watch/> For the latest information on who is saying what on the issue of the Census changes, including a list of those organizations stating a position on the changes.
3. Save Our Census – [www.savethecensus.ca](http://www.savethecensus.ca)
4. Letter Writing: [Canadian Institute of Planners](#)
5. Petition: [Keep the Canadian Census Long Form Petition](#)
6. Facebook Page: [Keep the Canadian Census Long Form](#)
7. Opinion: [Survey](#)



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