



Statement on the long form census
Industry Committee, House of Commons
by

Don McLeish on behalf of the *Statistical Society of Canada*

Many groups and individuals (including members of the government) have now spoken on the importance and the use of the data in the long form census and it is clear that it is essential to much of the Canadian economy and society. We agree with the government that some changes to the census should be considered. We also believe that these changes should be thoroughly tested to ensure that the quality of the data is not adversely affected, and that there is considerable expertise at Statistics Canada and on the National Statistics Council to provide the direction and framework for any major initiative restructuring the census.

There is overwhelming evidence that voluntary surveys are subject to bias. The degree of bias in such a survey is a complex function of the specific question, the response rate in the relevant subgroup, and the weights if any which are applied. From our letter to Minister Clement, dated July 9, 2010 “Voluntary census forms are like voluntary tax forms. Those who return them can hardly be expected to accurately represent those who do not. ... Is it unreasonable for the Canadian government to obtain unbiased statistical information in areas critical to planning for the future of Canada: business and trade statistics, the aging population, education and income? “

We respectfully submit that the following provides a reasonable compromise between the need to protect the privacy of individuals and the extreme importance of these data to Canadians:

- That the mandatory long form of the census for 2011 be reinstated (20% sample as previously).
- That Statistics Canada, with the advice of the National Statistics Council, be directed to undertake studies to show the impact of a voluntary surveyⁱ over a mandatory one for collecting census long form data. Statistics Canada will prepare a report indicating the degree of bias in each question of the voluntary survey. This report will inform Statistics Canada and the government on the future evolution of the census.
- That wherever possible the privacy concerns of individuals on specific questions be addressed with the assistance of the privacy commissioner, either by the removal or the rewording of specific questions.
- That, in order to restore faith in the independence of information provided by Statistics Canada, one of the pre-eminent statistical agencies in the world, the methodology used for collection and analysis by Statistics Canada be reaffirmed to be free of influence from any other body including government and NGOs, and private corporations, subject to those laws enacted by parliament protecting the privacy of individuals and the publicⁱⁱ.

In addition penalties applied for non-compliance with the Statistics Act should be reviewed by parliament.

We believe that the suggestions above provide a basis for a resolution of the current situation which respects both the unbiasedness of the data currently obtained with the mandatory long form as well as the rights of individuals to privacy.

ⁱ and other methods of data collection if desired

ⁱⁱ Every accredited Professional Statistician in Canada must adhere to a code of ethics which includes the requirement to "Maintain objectivity and strive to avoid procedural or personal bias. The creation of valid data-based information is vital to informed public opinion and policy."