

Open Letter to Prime Minister Stephen Harper: Keep the Compulsory Census Long-Form

The Right Honourable Stephen Harper
Prime Minister of Canada
Office of the Prime Minister
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A2

July 21, 2010

Dear Prime Minister,

We are writing to add the Association of Ontario Health Centres' (AOHC) name to the long list of organizations, societies and individual Canadians that are opposed to the elimination of the mandatory census long-form, and its proposed replacement with an unreliable and more costly voluntary survey. In its sum, this collective voice reflects the broadest base of expertise in business, economics, statistics, health care, social service, academic research and other areas of activity. The very diversity and breadth of this opposition, including tens of thousands of individuals and groups across the country, clearly demonstrates that this is *not* a matter of partisan political views. It is a matter of fact, and it is a matter of evidence-based policy and decision making.

AOHC's deep concern over the census decision is one that is shared by Canadians in all provinces and territories, across towns and cities, and across diverse areas of work. For these reasons, and as further elaborated below, the AOHC calls on the federal government to reverse its decision, and to maintain the compulsory long-form questionnaire as part of the 2011 Canada Census.

The federal government's decision to eliminate the compulsory long-form was taken after minimal consultation with Statistics Canada, and no consultation with researchers, policy-makers, fellow parliamentarians, community groups or business associations, all of whom depend on this data in their efforts to enhance social, economic and community development for Canadians. Had such consultation occurred, the federal government would have adequately understood the devastating impact this decision could have on Canadians.

From our particular perspective as an association representing Ontario's 100-plus community-based, primary health care organizations, including Community Health Centres (CHCs), Aboriginal Health Access Centres (AHACs), and Community Family Health Teams (CFHTs) we have a clear understanding of the impact that will be felt as a result of this decision. Our member health centres and their diverse health care staff, along with partner health care organizations in the community, will be greatly impeded in developing and delivering appropriate services if we erode Canada's only complete national database on factors such as education, income, employment, housing, ethnicity, and language. This database enables effective research on factors that influence health and the need for health care, including population level assessments that make possible effective planning of health care services and programs.

In addition to this immediate impact on service and program planning, the elimination of the mandatory census long-form would break the continuity of this Census component, which has been administered since 1981. This would prevent us from making meaningful comparisons of neighbourhoods, communities, towns, cities and diverse population groups over time. We would be unable to effectively measure both our successes in improving wellbeing and health at a population level, as well as ongoing



gaps. As TD Bank Chief Economist, Don Drummond, has stated, “Canada would be cast into an information fog for decades.”

Ultimately, the elimination of the compulsory long form would have the gravest impact on Canada’s most vulnerable community members, since efforts to address the inter-sections of health and wellbeing with factors such as poverty, inadequate housing, barriers to education, racialization and other trends at the census tract or neighbourhood level require reliable census data. *Globe and Mail* health columnist André Picard has accurately characterized this, noting that, “when the census is voluntary, the marginalized become further marginalized, and the wealthy become more comfortably invisible; the disparities at the core of so many health and social problems become glossed over.”

Decimating evidence-based public policy is unwise at any time. However, it is particularly disturbing in our current national and global contexts. As the Federation of Canadian Municipalities has stated, we need good data to best serve our communities. AOHC echoes this, affirming that social, economic and fiscal policy must be grounded in reliable data and evidence. The Canadian Census is essential in this regard, and the mandatory long-form questionnaire is an *indispensable* component.

In calling upon the federal government to reverse its census decision, we underscore the fact that the long-form Census has a response rate of over 95% and has been widely acclaimed as a highly reliable, detailed and well-protected source of information vital to Canadian social and economic development. This is in sharp contrast to the proposed voluntary survey that would be invalid and unreliable due to the bias of self-selection; an unacceptable, unscientific consequence that has been loudly decried by professional statisticians and their associations across Canada. This is far too high a price to pay for a few anecdotal complaints that the long form is intrusive, especially since the Office of the Privacy Commissioner has received only three complaints from Canadians — two in 2006 and one in 2001 — about any aspect of the Census.

Instead of rushing into unfounded, unsubstantiated and unscientific changes to Canada’s internationally-acclaimed census and Statistics Canada, the federal government should be educating the public on our shared responsibilities, including the Census, and how these contribute to our vision of a shared destiny and a healthy future.

For these reasons, the AOHC demands that the census long-form be kept, for the greater good of all.

Sincerely,



Adrianna Tetley.
Executive Director, AOHC

Copy to

Honourable Michael Ignatieff, Leader of the Official Opposition
Honourable Jack Layton, Leader of the New Democratic Party
Honourable Gilles Duceppe, Leader of the Bloc Québécois
Honourable Tony Clement, Minister of Industry
Munir Sheikh, Chief Statistician, Statistics Canada
AOHC Board of Directors