

# Changes to the Federal Census

## City of Edmonton's Response

### Recommendation:

That the Mayor, on behalf of City Council, send a letter to the Minister of Industry Canada and Edmonton's Members of Parliament, expressing the City of Edmonton's concerns with the recently announced changes to the federal census, as outlined in the July 15, 2010, Deputy City Manager's Office report 2010DCM068.

### Report Summary

**This report outlines the recent changes to the 2011 federal census and Administration's concerns and recommended action regarding those changes.**

### Report

#### Background

On June 26, 2010, the *Canada Gazette* published the questions to be included in the short-form questionnaire for the 2011 federal census. The publication did not include the mandatory census long-form questionnaire, which the Federal Government has decided to eliminate in favour of a voluntary National Household Survey that will be sent to one in three households.

In previous censuses, 80 percent of Canadian households received a census short-form with approximately seven basic questions. The remaining 20 percent of all households received a long-form with over 50 questions on issues such as education, employment,

health, income, housing, commuting, ethnicity and disability. Both forms were mandatory. The Federal Government is the only order of government with legislative authority to require mandatory completion of census questions.

The Minister of Industry Canada, the Honourable T. Clement, has stated that the decision to change the long-form questionnaire was based on complaints by Canadians about "the coercive and intrusive nature of the census". The changes to the 2011 census were made without any public or stakeholder consultation, or demonstration that the complaints against the long-form were significant in number and substance.

The City of Edmonton is concerned that the Federal Government's decision:

- will hinder the municipal sector's ability to plan a range of services, including affordable housing, public transit routes and community support programs
- has the potential to jeopardize much of the City's current investment in socio-economic data and the ability to analyse that information on a local level
- will require that the City expend additional funds on research to fill gaps in geographic or demographic details that may result from the proposed census changes
- may compromise the ability of the City to deliver programs and allocate scarce resources in a timely, targeted and cost-effective way across the City's diverse neighbourhoods
- may result in decisions being made using unreliable and biased census

data, because voluntary participation will likely lead to under-representation of “vulnerable” demographics (lowest income, minority and Aboriginal groups) and highest-income residents

The City of Edmonton’s concerns align with those of other municipalities, business communities, professional associations, researchers and other stakeholders across Canada, many of which have publicly opposed the changes and/or written letters to the Minister of Industry Canada to ask the Federal Government to rescind its decision.

The Federation of Canadian Municipalities and social scientists, in protesting the decision, have stated that the census long-form is the best way researchers have of gathering detailed social and economic information about local communities.

Furthermore, the census long-form is the only national source of information on Aboriginal educational achievement. Without the census long form there will be no information about whether Aboriginal education results are improving and no data with which to objectively assess policy alternatives.

The Canadian commissioner of official languages is investigating the elimination of the mandatory census long-form and its impact on the official language minorities communities since the census short-form does not feature questions about knowledge or use of official languages in households.

Although the City of Edmonton, by policy, conducts an annual census that provides current data on the citizens of

Edmonton and assists in the planning and evaluation for civic programs, the federal census is the most reliable source of comparative data for Edmonton and other municipalities in the country.

### **Next Steps:**

Administration proposes that the City of Edmonton send a letter to the Minister of Industry Canada and Edmonton’s Members of Parliament expressing the City’s concerns as they relate to the ability of municipalities to effectively and efficiently plan for and deliver services to residents.

The letter will urge the Federal Government to reinstate the mandatory long-form, at least for 2011, and work with stakeholders to devise a solution that addresses the Federal Government’s concerns and stakeholders’ issues related to the loss of information from the long-form. The letter will further advise that the City of Edmonton is willing to engage in discussions and/or participate in stakeholder consultations on the issue.

Sending a letter to the Minister of Industry Canada and Edmonton’s Members of Parliament is in line with actions by The Federation of Canadian Municipalities, which has sent a letter to the Minister of Industry Canada (Attachment 1), and other metropolitan centres such as the City of Calgary and the City of Toronto, which are preparing to send letters to the Federal Government and their respective Members of Parliament.

### **Focus Area**

The information provided in this report is consistent with Council’s strategic vision, including:

- Improve Edmonton’s Livability
- Transforming Edmonton’s Urban Form
- Preserve and Sustain Edmonton’s Environment
- Shift Edmonton’s Transportation Mode
- Ensure Edmonton’s Financial Sustainability

### **Justification of Recommendation**

The recommendation will enable the City of Edmonton to raise its concerns about the changes to the federal census and the significant impact the changes would have on the ability of municipalities to effectively plan for and deliver services to residents.

### **Attachments**

1. Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) Letter to the Minister of Industry Canada

### **Others Reviewing this Report**

D. H. Edey, General Manager,  
Corporate Services Department

## Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) Letter to the Minister of Industry Canada

July 8, 2010

The Honourable Tony Clement, P.C., M.P.  
Minister of Industry Canada  
300 Slater Street, 16<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0C8

Dear Minister:

As you know, on June 26, 2011 Statistics Canada announced that it has discontinued the mandatory long-form questionnaire in favour of a voluntary National Household Survey (NHS). As the minister responsible for Statistics Canada, we are writing to urge you to consider the consequences of this decision.

Federal, provincial, territorial and municipal governments all use the data that is gathered on the long-form to target and evaluate the effectiveness of public services and investments. In fact, over 25 pieces of federal legislation alone require Census data in order to allocate funds and target and evaluate services, with many more examples at the provincial, territorial and municipal levels. Municipalities use Census data, particularly long-form data, to target which resident groups and neighbourhoods require public services like immigrant settlement support, low-income housing, child care and transit.

Making the replacement for the long form voluntary will likely reduce the quality of the census data for two reasons:

- **Sample size:** The NHS will likely generate fewer responses than the long-form Census questionnaire. Although the NHS sample size is more than twice as large as the long-form Census (4.5 million households versus 2 million), the response rate for a voluntary survey is much lower for a mandatory survey like the Census. Even at a 30 per cent response rate, which is higher than Statistics Canada expects from most voluntary surveys, the NHS will only generate 1.35 million responses. The long-form questionnaire enjoys a response rate of over 97 per cent which translates to 1.94 million responses – over 40 per cent more than the NHS. This difference in sample size is significant when using data at a municipal and neighborhood level: a smaller national sample size means fewer samples within local areas, which reduces the quality and availability of data from these smaller areas. FCM has been engaged with Statistics Canada and various federal government departments in an effort to make local area data more accessible and affordable to municipal governments – a welcome effort that recognizes how important federally collected data is to good municipal government. The change to the Census will reduce the quality and availability of local area data that municipalities rely on to improve service and performance.

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- **Respondent profile:** The people who tend to rely most on many municipal programs, such as recent immigrants, aboriginal Canadians and those in lower socio-economic groups, are the very ones who would be least likely to fill out a voluntary survey. This will result in undercounting these population segments and reduce the quality of available information on these groups who are often hard to serve.

The value of this data needs to be weighed against what is asked of citizens to complete the long-form:

- For most households, the long-form questionnaire requires on average less than 20 to 30 minutes to complete, much less than completing an income tax return.
- Statistically, the average household will receive the long-form once every 25 years (once every five Censuses).
- Statistics Canada is highly rigorous in protecting the anonymity and confidentiality of individual long-form responses.

To keep Canada strong, we need to know how the country is changing, where people live, work and raise their families. The census helps us do that. With good quality data, we can do a better job serving taxpayers: we can see where we need to run new bus routes, build affordable housing, or set up support programs for new Canadians. These changes in the census will likely hurt the quality of Census data available to municipalities. That will make it harder for us to serve our citizens. The federal government needs to explain how it will make sure that doesn't happen.

Sincerely,



Hans Cunningham  
President

HC/at:sd