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An Open Letter from the Canadian Network of Metropolis Centers
Canada should keep its Census mandatory and maintain its status as a public resource

For more than a century, Canada has had two features in its Censuses that have enormous public value. First, all households have been required to fill out the Census, and for the past 40 years, a subset of households has been required to fill out a more detailed Census, called the “long form”. The long form responses represent our best data on small populations, including ethnic minorities, linguistic communities, immigrant groups and Aboriginal peoples, and so are vitally important to our collective growth and aspirations as a cohesive and diverse society. Second, all census data has been made public after 92 years. This makes it possible for individuals to trace their family histories, and allows historians to study Canadian society over long periods of time.

The Government of Canada has recently announced that they will eliminate these two features of the Census of Canada, starting with the 2011 Census. In particular, they propose to make the Census long form voluntary rather than mandatory, and to keep the data secret in perpetuity rather than releasing it after 92 years. These two policy changes will have serious negative repercussions for all Canadians.

The Census long form collects detailed information on how and where people work, what languages they speak, their ethnic background, citizenship and other topics. This information allows social scientists to construct a detailed picture of our diverse society, where it has been, and where it is going. These pictures in turn allow us to assess our development, especially as continued immigration has shaped Canada’s transition into the 21st century.

In the United States (and almost all other rich countries), the Census is mandatory. If the Canadian Census were made voluntary, then Canada would pull out of line with international standards, destroying comparability with international data. Further, we would be unable to firmly draw conclusions about small populations because we would not have information about the households that choose not to respond. Finally, by eliminating comparability with previous censuses, the proposed changes would significantly devalue ALL of the data collected in the long form of the census over the past half century.

Data from past Censuses have entered the public domain after 92 years, long after the death of all respondents. This means that their privacy was strictly maintained while alive, but that historical researchers and genealogists could learn about their circumstances after their death. Keeping our hands in our history is vitally important for us as individuals, and also collectively as a society.

We, the directors of Canada’s five Metropolis Centers of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Diversity, believe that Canada should keep its Census mandatory and maintain its status as a public resource.

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