Voluntary Survey No Substitute for Mandatory Census

Ottawa, August 3, 2010—Imagine two struggling towns competing for a plasma screen factory, and the firm makes its decision based on census data which is incorrect because one town’s post-secondary graduates did not complete the voluntary long-form questionnaire, skewing the results.

Missing out on the investment that would help balance its books, the losing community faces closing its sportsplex or cancelling its blue box collection. All due to the lack of reliable demographic, education and economic trend information.

The above situation—and many others like it—could come about due to just one unfortunate government decision on the mandatory or voluntary nature of the long-form census questionnaire, according to the Canadian Institute of Actuaries (CIA).

Faced with the possibility of decisions like this having so many ripple effects, Micheline Dionne, President of the CIA, whose members are experts in the fields of mathematics and the use of statistics, said: “The long-form census questionnaire has to remain mandatory.”

Actuaries have extensive knowledge of risk and probability, and they warn that exchanging the current mandatory long-form questionnaire—the results of which are a valuable tool for business and setting public policy—for a voluntary survey would render the results unreliable. Consequently, the data would be of little value for planners, developers, corporations and governments who rely on accurate information about Canada and its people.

Statistical experts stress that the data derived from such questionnaires are subject to low response rates, sampling errors and bias, as certain demographic groups might not reply. Furthermore, many decisions made using these figures are based on changes and trends that have emerged since the prior census and any alteration that decreases the data’s reliability will render those decisions unworkable. Such devalued information would reduce its usefulness to those willing to pay for it, indirectly increasing the survey’s cost through lower revenues to Statistics Canada. The CIA’s view is that:

- The current long-form census questionnaire’s mandatory nature makes it a formidable source of reliable information. Furthermore, the database it generates is used extensively to calibrate or corroborate results from smaller or voluntary surveys, and it would be difficult to adjust such studies by other means.

- The current questionnaire is believed to have a response rate of 98 percent, a figure which would likely never be achieved by a voluntary survey.
Regarding privacy concerns, the CIA says: “We believe they can be addressed directly by explaining the safeguards that are in place and by eliminating questions that are particularly objectionable. Statistics Canada has substantial safeguards such that data can be collected and analyzed without personal identifying information being attached.”

Ms Dionne said, “Voluntary surveys can be unreliable, biased and inaccurate, which is not acceptable within a census. Statistics Canada’s global reputation is based on the scope and accuracy of its data. That information is essential to countless people, organizations and governments. By not switching the long-term census questionnaire from mandatory to voluntary, Canada and its global partners will continue to benefit from the availability of credible census data to help them with making better decisions. We advise retaining the questionnaire’s mandatory nature.”

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For more information contact Josée Racette, the CIA’s project manager, public affairs: (613) 236 8196 ext. 107, cell.: (613) 219-1280 or e-mail josee.racette@actuaries.ca

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