

Statistics Canada celebrates 'best census since 1666' ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

On the long list of what Canadians love, it seems you can add filling out census forms to pastimes such as watching hockey and listening to The Tragically Hip.

Statistics Canada is celebrating its "best census ever" after 98.4 per cent of the census population filled out their long-and short-form questionnaires this year.

Most Canadians got a 10-question short version of the census, but one in four randomly selected households received the 36-page long-form questionnaire known as the National Household Survey.

This was the first year for the reinstated mandatory long-form census since the Conservative government cancelled it for the 2011 census, replacing it with a voluntary national household survey.

The 2016 collection response rate for the longer version of the census was 97.8 per cent, the best ever recorded, said the government agency.

The census collects demographic information on every person living in Canada. The data is then used by governments, businesses, associations, community organizations and others to make important decisions at the municipal, provincial and the federal levels. Results from the census are also used to help guide payment allocation at all levels of government.

Chief statistician Wayne Smith said this year's collection was the "best census since 1666."

Statistics Canada said the first census in Canada was initiated by Jean Talon, the first intendant of New France, that year. The census counted the colony's 3,215 inhabitants and noted their age, sex, marital status and occupation.

"The 2016 census will provide high-quality information for virtually all communities across Canada," Smith said in a release Monday.

Economic Development Minister Navdeep Bains echoed the praise, saying "Canadians can be proud of their participation."

The census "provide the high-quality information needed to plan critical services such as child care, housing and public transportation for all Canadians, he said in a separate release.

Marilyn Gladu, the Conservative science critic, lauded the census success despite her party's past move to try to kill the mandatory long-form iteration.

"It's good that we have had a great response ... I think there's a lot of people who rely on this information," the Sarnia-Lambton MP said, adding she wasn't part of the previous government and her job is now to provide "fresh eyes" to the science portfolio while in opposition.

Most efficient census, too

Not only did Canadians fill out the census with gusto, they were pretty competent doing it. Statistics Canada said almost nine in 10 Canadian households completed the questionnaire without help, making it the most efficient censuses in the world.

The enthusiasm isn't all that surprising. When Statistics Canada began mailing out access codes in early May, the hashtag #Census2016 trended nationwide, and the website briefly broke down.

Stats Can at the time attributed the outage to overwhelming "enthusiasm." Internal documents obtained later by CBC News in fact found that poor webpage design combined with heavy traffic to crash the department's website, and the outage lasted longer than first reported.

Nevertheless, the agency said responders weren't deterred from filling out the survey online. Almost 68 per cent of people filled out the census online, surpassing Statistics Canada's goal of a 65 per cent and setting another world record.

Jail time

Of course, filling out the census isn't an altruistic ode to data-driven decision making. Both forms of the census are mandatory. Failing to provide census information could result in a fine of up to \$500, imprisonment of up to three months, or both.

In 2014, a 79-year-old Toronto woman was found guilty of violating the Statistics Act over her refusal to fill out the mandatory census. Janet Churnin was handed a conditional discharge.

Audrey Tobias, an 89-year-old woman who also refused to fill out the 2011 census, was brought to court but was found not guilty by a Toronto judge who soundly criticized the government for trying to prosecute someone who was a "model citizen."

The first results from the 2016 census, which will focus on population and dwelling counts, will be published on Feb. 8, 2017.

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