



Marketing Research and Intelligence Association
L'Association de la Recherche et de l'Intelligence Marketing

BY EMAIL: INDU@parl.gc.ca

September 2, 2010

Hon. Michael Chong, M.P.
Chair
c/o Michelle Tittley, Clerk
Standing Committee on Industry, Natural Resources
and Technology
Sixth Floor, 131 Queen Street
House of Commons
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6

Re: Committee's Study of the Long-Form Portion of the Canadian Census

Mr. Chair:

The Marketing Research and Intelligence Association (MRIA) is pleased to submit this Brief to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Industry, Natural Resources, Science and Technology, outlining the industry's position on the long-form portion of the Canadian census. We regret that we were unable to accept the Committee's invitation to appear before it on this issue on August 27.

The Marketing Research and Intelligence Association is the national, voluntary self-regulatory Association that governs and represents the marketing, survey and public opinion research and market intelligence industry in Canada, and is its single authoritative voice. Our membership includes over 1,800 individual research practitioners and more than 400 Corporate members, comprised of research agencies of all sizes and scope, and many Corporate buyers of research services. MRIA develops and enforces standards for the Canadian survey research industry, which accounts for over three quarters of a billion dollars in economic activity annually and employs more than 5,000.

The issue of whether or not Canada should have a mandatory long-form census questionnaire is of prime importance to MRIA members. Specifically, our concern is that the Government's planned cancellation of the long-form questionnaire will adversely affect the availability, quality and reliability of essential data collected about Canadians.

This Brief outlines our industry's support for the continuation of the mandatory long-form census questionnaire, and sets out a number of arguments urging Cabinet to reverse its decision to cancel it.

The data generated by the mandatory long-form census questionnaire provide survey researchers with a deep and rich set of facts about Canadians, facts that are reliable at the local, regional and national levels. Researchers rely on that essential data when they conduct research on behalf of decision-makers from all sectors -- from governments at all levels, to not-for-profits and registered charities such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), to corporations of all shapes and sizes.

Marketing and survey research plays a pivotal role in our society, in improving business and public policy decisions and in giving voice to the opinions of Canadians. For example, in the area of public policy, survey research plays an essential part in ensuring the effectiveness of anti-smoking campaigns aimed at kids and teenagers. Another example is public transit. When Canadians take transit to work, opinion research helps ensure that the service meets the needs of riders and explores ways to increase ridership.

MRIA – representing members who are experts in survey methodology and data collection -- can attest to the fact that the robustness and reliability of the data generated by the long-form census questionnaire has been due to the huge sample involved (one in five households), and because response has been mandatory.

The data generated by the long-form census questionnaire also constitute crucial input for the sample designs of other national surveys, and for computing and extrapolating rates for key social and economic indicators. In other words, survey researchers rely on the long-form census data to adjust their survey results to be nationally representative.

MRIA cannot stress strongly enough that without data from the long-form census questionnaire as a point of reference, all Canadian survey results – including those from the NHS – may be biased on important dimensions such as income, education, housing status, and many others. Researchers across the country, working on projects in all areas of public policy and business decision-making, will have no data with which to correct for these biases. It will also not be possible for researchers to compare numbers from census to census, and analyze trends.

Whilst the Government has proposed a new National Household Survey (NHS) -- which would have a wider distribution (one in three households) than the long-form questionnaire -- the response rate to it will likely be substantially lower and the resulting data less robust, given that hard-to-reach segments of the population will not likely be included among respondents.

The experience of survey researchers and social scientists is that those in lower income groups, ethnic minorities, and the wealthiest citizens are least likely to answer questions voluntarily. We submit, therefore, that the NHS would lead to skewed data and doubts about the accuracy of information that is relied upon by public policy and business decision-makers.

We believe that the decision to replace the long-form questionnaire with a National Household Survey does not represent good value for Canadian taxpayers, given the additional costs that will be required to distribute the NHS to a larger proportion of households and, thereafter, to secure an adequate response rate.

MRIA is aware that the Government may have looked to the U.S. in making the decision to eliminate the long-form questionnaire. However, there is a critical difference between what the Americans have done and the proposed new Canadian census process. Whilst it is true that the U.S. has eliminated the long-form from its decennial census, the complementary piece to the new American census approach is telling.

The U.S. Census Bureau has introduced a new American Community Survey (ACS), an ongoing statistical survey which is being sent to approximately 250,000 addresses monthly (or 3 million households per year). The ACS will regularly gather data about Americans and their households, their education, income levels, and other demographic information, data which was previously secured only via the long-form. Response to the ACS is mandatory.

Without robust census data, it is exceedingly difficult for governments to respond effectively to shifting patterns of need in the populace or to introduce changes that provide the greatest value for money. One particularly problematic outcome of the elimination of the mandatory long-form questionnaire would be the eradication of the only reliable, national source of information on aboriginal educational achievement.

MRIA also submits that, from a big picture perspective, because the mandatory long-form questionnaire generates more reliable data, it is actually more effective at limiting intrusion into Canadians' lives – by reducing poorly targeted marketing communications that would otherwise be sent to them -- than moving to a voluntary National Household Survey would be.

We therefore urge Cabinet to reconsider and reverse its decision to eliminate the mandatory long-form census questionnaire.

We thank you for considering the arguments put forward in this brief. Should you wish to contact the Association, please do so through our Executive Director, Mr. Brendan Wycks, at 1-888-602-6742, ext. 8724 or by email at bwycks@mria-arim.ca.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Edwin Gibson". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Edwin Gibson, CMRP
President

c.c.: Members of the INDU Committee