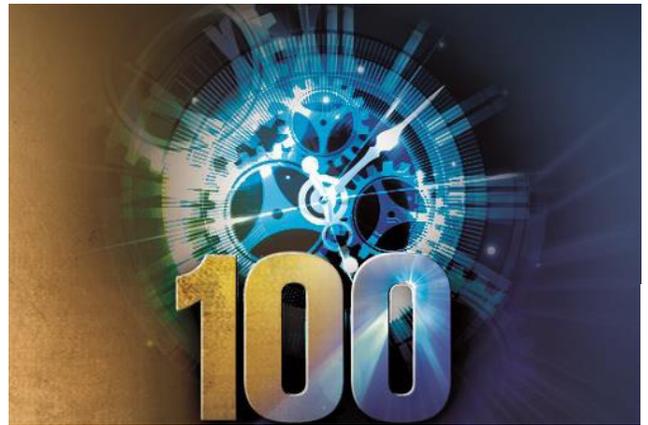


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## 100 years and counting

### More than a century of censuses in Canada

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## More than a century of censuses in Canada

### Introduction

The Census of Population is unquestionably the Statistics Canada survey that Canadians are most familiar with, as households are called on to participate every five years. The overall response rate for the last census, held in 2016, was 98.4%, while the response rate for the long-form questionnaire was 97.8%. As a result, the census provided an accurate portrait of the population. Censuses have long helped Canadians and organizations to develop services and make decisions based on the data collected through this major statistical undertaking. Although Statistics Canada is celebrating its 100th birthday this year, censuses were conducted in Canada well before the national statistical agency was created. Interestingly, censuses of the population have existed for thousands of years, and their usefulness has evolved over the years, as has the type of data collected. This article provides a brief historical overview of censuses around the world, with emphasis on their evolution in Canada.

### Censuses in history

The first known censuses were conducted in Babylonia and enumerated people, as well as animals and certain food supplies. These statistics, collected on clay tablets nearly 6,000 years ago, are thought to have helped officials get a better idea of the amount of food needed to meet the needs of the population. The oldest conserved census was conducted in China in the year 2 of this era, under the Han dynasty, and enumerated more than 57 million residents. Censuses were also conducted in other ancient civilizations, including Egypt, Greece, Persia, India and the Roman Empire. In most cases, the data were used to build armies and collect taxes. However, they could also be used to determine the available workforce or even monitor behaviour. In the third century, the census conducted by Diocletian following the creation of the tetrarchy in the Roman Empire was used by the government to learn more about the population—it had previously been conducted only to levy taxes. In the Middle Ages, censuses were still being conducted in the East, but they seemed to have died out in the West. Still, there was the census conducted by William the Conqueror in 1086 in England that was recorded in the Domesday Book. However, some consider that survey to be more of a

land register than a census. It was not until the modern era (18th century) that censuses, as we know them today, began cropping up, including the ones conducted in Canada.

### Censuses in Canada pre-Dominion Bureau of Statistics

The first census was conducted in 1666 in New France, which later became Canada. Jean Talon, the intendant of the colony, enumerated 3,215 European settlers in Québec, Trois-Rivières and Montréal. This did not include the Indigenous populations and the King's troops. The census recorded their age, sex, marital

Familles des habitans	ages	qualités & conditions
Jean Godfray	27	marier
Marie-Anne	16	jeune
Isabelle Godfray	13	jeune
Jacques Grimaud	23	jeune
Jacques Leduc	26	jeune
Isabelle Grimaud	13	jeune
Jacques Leduc	36	marier
Anne Leduc	21	jeune
Isabelle Leduc	3	jeune
Marie-Anne Leduc	1	jeune
Jean Leduc	34	marier
Marie-Anne Leduc	25	jeune
Isabelle Leduc	2	jeune
Marie-Anne Leduc	1	jeune
Victoire Leduc	40	marier
Marie-Anne Leduc	29	jeune
Marie Leduc	8	jeune
Anne Leduc	13	jeune
Jean Leduc	4	jeune
Robert Leduc	20	marier & habitant engagé
Marie-Anne Leduc	13	jeune
Marie-Anne Leduc	40	marier & habitant

A page from the 1666 census conducted by Jean Talon.  
Source: Library and Archives Canada, MIKAN no. 2318856

status and occupation. There were 35 other censuses conducted after that in the French colony, the last one in 1739. After New France came under the rule of the British Empire in 1763, it was not until the 19th century that recurrent censuses would re-emerge in Canada. Shortly after the province of Canada was created in 1840, the 1847 *Census and Statistics Act* provided for a census and the collection of statistical information through the creation the Board of Registration and Statistics. The Board of Registration and Statistics conducted a census in the province of Canada in 1851/1852 following pressure from the British government, which wanted a census of its colonies at the same time as its own census. Censuses were also conducted in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, but they were published in different reports. Those censuses enumerated 1,842,265 people in the province of Canada, 193,800 in New Brunswick and 276,854 in Nova Scotia.

In 1867, the *British North America Act* created the Dominion of Canada and stipulated that a census be conducted in 1871, and every 10 years thereafter. That first official census enumerated 3,485,761 people in the original four provinces of Canada, i.e., Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. It was conducted using the *de jure* method, the same method

used by Jean Talon in 1666 which consists in enumerating people by their place of residence rather than where they are on Census Day. The next censuses saw the addition of Canada's new provinces and an increase in the population. They also saw changes to their content and techniques. These changes included the use of electric tabulating machinery in 1891; the Canadian population reaching 5 million in the 1901 Census; and the censuses in the Prairie provinces being conducted every 10 years beginning in 1906, as set out in the *Census and Statistics Act* of 1905. Following Canada's participation in the Boer War as a sovereign country and in the context of the First World War in Canada, it became clear that quality information on the Canadian population and economy was necessary.

### A century of progress

In 1918, the Dominion Bureau of Statistics was created by the *Statistics Act*, centralizing statistical production in Canada. The census, which fell under the new organization led by Robert H. Coats, underwent significant modernization and new techniques were adopted. First, in 1931, three sorter tabulators, created by Bureau employee Fernand Bélisle, were used to compile data at a rate 50 times faster than in 1921. The 1941 Census also saw a host of innovations,

including the use of sampling for the first time through a dwelling questionnaire given to a tenth of households. Then, in the 1951 Census, "mark-sense" technology was used for the population and dwelling questionnaires, in which a reader generated punch cards, a task that was previously done manually. Due to rapid population growth, 1956 marked the beginning of five-year censuses in Canada. In the 1961 Census, computer technology processed the data collected using mark-sense documents. Three hundred years after Jean Talon's census, the 1966 Census enumerated more than 20 million people in Canada.

In 1971, the Dominion Bureau of Statistics became Statistics Canada, and the *Statistics Act* was amended. In 1971, the



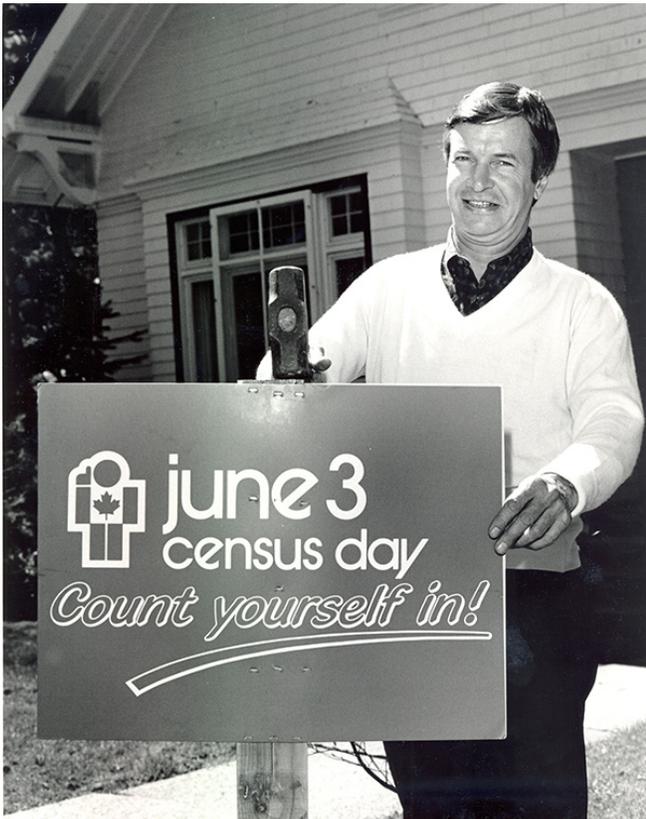
A pantograph used in the 1931 Census to punch cards

100th anniversary of the first census in Canada, a major change was made to the data collection method: self-enumeration. That census also included a short-form questionnaire that was distributed to two-thirds of the population, and a long-form questionnaire distributed to the rest. The 1981 Census also included two different questionnaires, but the long-form questionnaire was only for one-fifth of the population. In 1986, the census took on the same scope as the census conducted every 10 years, while to date, only the short-form questionnaire had been distributed every five years. In 1991, a new method was introduced, whereby most of the population could return the questionnaire by mail after completing the questionnaire. Then, in 1996, the census results were translated into 12 Indigenous languages and 37 other non-official languages. In 2001, the census revealed that Canada had a population of more than 30 million. In the 2006 Census, a new data collection method was introduced: the electronic

questionnaire. In fact, more than 18.5% of households completed their questionnaire online that year. It was also the last census for which results were published in print format. In 2011, the long-form questionnaire was replaced by the National Household Survey, in which participation was voluntary. For the 2016 Census, the long-form questionnaire was reintroduced and sent to one in four households. All in all, we can see that over the years—from Jean Talon’s time to the modern day—the Canadian census has undergone a major evolution.

## Conclusion

Although censuses have been around for a long time, they are now an essential tool for democracy in Canada. First used to develop the colony, they later served to determine the number of seats in Parliament—and still do. Since census-taking began in Canada, censuses have evolved to reflect the social, economic and cultural changes in the country. The data they collect contribute to informed decision-making based on quality information. Censuses are essential to the statistical system, providing a backbone for surveys and leveraging information from other sources. Throughout Statistics Canada’s history, the census has been a catalyst for innovation and will continue to be in the years ahead.



1986 Census

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