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Census replacement to portray patterns of immigration, aboriginals and religion

Heather Scoffield, The Canadian Press May 7, 2013 4:30 am



Manager of settlement programs, Khim Tan, poses for a photo in the community room at Mosaic, in Vancouver, B.C. on Monday, May 6, 2013. Mosaic is a non-profit resource centre for immigrants and refugees. THE CANADIAN PRESS/Jimmy Jeong

OTTAWA – Canada is about to find out how colourful a country it is. Just how vibrant the colours will be, however — well, that's another story.

On Wednesday, Statistics Canada will publish the first part of its controversial National Household Survey, detailing patterns of

immigration, aboriginals and religion.

The first-of-its-kind voluntary survey, which compiles responses from more than three million people, replaces the cancelled long-form census. And even Statistics Canada itself has admitted it won't match the detailed, neighbourhood-level information of its mandatory predecessor.

Nonetheless, it's expected to offer a sophisticated and up-to-date look at the cultural mosaic that has become synonymous with the Canadian identity.

On immigration, the new data should be able to show where Canada's newcomers came from, what language they speak, and where they settled.

In the last census, immigration was increasingly from Asia, rather than Europe. And while most immigrants settled in the big cities, smaller centres were getting their share too.

Will those trends continue? Have visible minorities actually become majorities in Canada's big cities?

"We're actually eagerly awaiting (the survey). Because part of understanding the mosaic on the ground is from looking at this data," said Khim Tan, manager of settlement services for MOSAIC, a non-profit organization that helps newcomers integrate into Vancouver.

Tan is constantly anticipating where the next wave of newcomers will come from, what languages they will be speaking, what skills and resources they have and where they will likely settle in the Vancouver area.

The demographics are in constant flux, said Tan, but the National Household Survey should give her solid data to back up anecdotal evidence. She said she sees a rising tide of Filipinos, but fewer Koreans and people from Hong Kong. And she sees more and more newcomers moving straight to the suburb of Surrey instead of the more-established Richmond, where housing has become less affordable.

Tan will be watching closely on Wednesday to see if those trends are well-entrenched or on the wane so that she can design programs accordingly.

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On a national scale, the details of the NHS are crucial in dealing with what Brian Lee Crowley believes is Canada's biggest challenge: population aging.

The only way Canada's economy can overcome the effects of an aging workforce is to better include people who are being marginalized, such as youth, aboriginal people and immigrants, said Crowley, the managing director of the Ottawa-based Macdonald-Laurier Institute think-tank.

The more Canadian leaders know about these groups, the easier it will be to pull them into productive employment, he added.

"It's going to be terribly important to find ways to get them integrated into the workforce."

Aboriginal Peoples are traditionally the fastest growing segment of Canada's population, and most analysts assume that trend has continued over the past five years.

But those numbers have to be treated with care, said Doug Norris, chief demographer at Environics Analytics and a former senior census official at Statistics Canada.

That's because bursts of aboriginal population growth in the past have partly been linked to more people coming forward to declare their aboriginal heritage. Plus, some bands have many members who refuse to fill out government surveys — in protest and for fear the information will be turned against them.

Indeed, Statistics Canada has warned that some groups may be under-represented in the new survey. In particular, Aboriginal Peoples — especially status Indians — as well as black people were expected to be less responsive than other groups.

The agency says it has tried to compensate for any bias in the data.

Even so, understanding the dynamics of the aboriginal population is the basis for developing policy that will deal with the social issues that undermine so many aboriginal communities, says Ovide Mercredi, a former national chief.

While it's fine for governments to look to natural resource development as a practical way to draw aboriginal people into productive employment, Mercredi said governments — including First Nations leaders — also have to deal at the same time with overcrowding, addictions and low levels of education that impede the progress of youth.

The survey this week only scratches the surface in those areas, but the trends are well-established and well-known, he added.

"What is needed is a master plan."

On religion, the survey is expected to illustrate whether Canadians continue to turn their backs on religion, and whether increasing immigration has fuelled the growth of an increasingly diverse fabric of faith.

Detailed comparisons with the past will be difficult, warned Norris: the last census questions on religion were in 2001. Protestantism was on the decline, while Catholicism was rising. Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism were also on the increase.

Generally, while the trends are largely expected to continue, the survey is already attracting unprecedented scrutiny, mainly because of the methodological issues that stem from replacing a mandatory census with a voluntary survey.

"No one has really tried it. It's been a big experiment," said Norris.

"It's going to tell us what the impact is going to be of carrying out a census on a voluntary basis."

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