INTRODUCTION

STATCAN'S CENTURY: A NATIONAL INSTITUTION, A FAMILY TRADITIONAND A CHALLENGING FUTURE

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Randy Boswell is an associate professor at Carleton University's School of Journalism and Communication. He is a long-time Ottawa journalist who developed a unique national history beat as a Postmedia News writer from 2003-13. He has published academic studies about Canadian environmental history and archaeological history, and writes regularly on Canadian history and politics.

In the spring of 1986, for a few weeks before and after the June 3 "Census Day" held across the country that year, I was Statistics Canada's door-knocking, head-counting, form-filling emissary in my home town of Grand Valley, Ontario — population 1,255.

As a 19-year-old census taker, I was also StatCan's mullet-wearing, Duran Duran-loving, Walkman-grooving guy in G.V., roaming the streets (all dozen of them or so) like the Big Shot government agent that I briefly was, clipboard in hand.

By design, the census captured a frozen moment in time in the life of our village in south-central Ontario. Only now, in the afterglow of StatCan's 100th anniversary last year — and at a stage in my life when even a bad haircut would be welcome on this rather barren, 52-year-old scalp — do I realize I was part of history, a bit player in an important national mission to take measure of Canada's citizenry.

Today, we know Grand Valley had 1,255 souls in '86 because I helped count them. My mother had done the same for the 1976 census, when the Valley's population was just 1,096. A few years ago, my daughter — also aged 19, but with an iPod and a hairstyle more likely to stand the test of time — was a StatCan rep for the 2016 census, chasing numbers at select apartment buildings throughout Ottawa (population 934,243 at the time).

This has been a true family affair — three generations of collecting basic data about our fellow Canadians, contributing in our own little way to the information infrastructure that underpins the country's social, cultural and economic policies and programs.

With some measure of pride, I can say we've had a hand in shaping Canada's sense of itself.

One more memory: on Feb. 8, 2012 — more than a

quarter-century after my gig as a census taker back home — I was literally locked up with dozens of other journalists in a StatCan building in Ottawa from midnight to 9 a.m. while swimming in an ocean of fresh statistics about Canada's population gathered during the 2011 census.

The media "lock up" — we were strictly forbidden from communicating beyond the walls of the government office complex overnight — allowed news writers to sift out highlights, localize storylines and get expert input from federal statisticians and demographers in the hours before the census results were officially, widely, publicly released.

On that occasion, reporting for newspapers across the country, I had the privilege of explaining to Canadians some big-picture changes to their nation, including the surging population in Western Canada (for the first time, there were more people living west of Ontario than east) and an overall number of inhabitants that had surpassed 33 million — thanks largely to immigration but also, to some extent, healthier and prolonged lifetimes that meant (among other things) an unprecedented number of Canadians were reaching the age of 100.

(We learned later in 2012, when the next batch of 2011 census stats was released, that the exact number of Canadians over 100 was a staggering 5,825, giving us a pretty impressive army of centenarians that will only grow much, much larger in the coming decades.)

Now Statistics Canada itself has joined those ranks. This edition of *Canadian Issues* was inspired by StatCan's recent 100th anniversary and the December 2018 conference "Statistics Canada: 100 Years and Counting," held in Ottawa and co-sponsored by the Association for Canadian Studies, The Canadian Institute for Identities and Migration, Environics Analytics, the Vanier Institute of the Family, and Statistics Canada itself.

The insights that emerged from that event, a number of which are collected here in essay form, not only remind us of StatCan's indelible imprint on Canada's progress and prosperity since the days of the Dominion Bureau of Statistics, but also point to the tremendous challenges — and opportunities — facing the agency in the age of Big Data, social media and heightened concerns about real and imagined threats to personal privacy.

Our invitation for contributions to this issue of CITC framed the task as follows: "As we reflect on the history of this vital agency, the future of data-gathering and the challenges we face as a nation, what issue (or issues) should most trouble or excite us? How should the work of Statistics Canada evolve? Where should the lines be drawn between privacy rights and the country's need for information to profile its current population and plan for its future?"

We are grateful for the range and depth of responses provided by such a distinguished array of contributors.

Sen. Donna Dasko, one of Canada's best-known pollsters before she accepted an appointment to the Senate in June 2018, provides an excellent overview of the evolving set of challenges facing both survey firms and federal statisticians in tapping truly random samplings of population data in the digital era. She also highlights StatCan's sterling reputation for accuracy and innovation and its "perfect record of protecting the confidentiality of its respondents."

Demographics expert Gustave Goldmann tackles the thorny issue of privacy protection in the world of information gathering and argues the solution to the "Gordian knot" facing public-sector data collectors is to better explain the immense value of their work in sustaining Canada's "national security, health care, social support, public safety, standards for housing, standards for food quality and safety, transportation security, to name but a few."

In his essay, Michael Haan, Canada Research Chair in Migration and Ethnic Relations at Western University, warns about the critical need for social scientists to thoughtfully, continually embrace new methods of data collection and analysis — to confront the challenges posed by Big Data, machine learning and more — to remain relevant in an exciting but uncertain future.

ACS president Jack Jedwab illuminates the emerging problems around the terminology of identification — particularly the mounting challenges to the term "visible minority" as a useful descriptor in gathering population data and constructing public policy. "Identities and identification are in flux — as is the terminology we use to define ourselves," he writes. "In pluralist democracies, citizens define themselves in multiple ways and census takers face considerable challenges in measuring identities in highly charged contexts."

Jan Kestle, the president and founder of Environics Analytics, underscored the importance of building and maintaining trust among Canadians when it comes to data-gathering: "Clearly," she states, "we in the data community are not doing a good enough job at helping Canadians understand why good data are so important to their lives."

In an excellent demonstration of the importance of skilful analysis of health, socio-economic and other information collected in Canada, economist Musah Khalid debunks the notion that this country is suffering the same "deaths of despair" phenomenon widely cited in the United States.

Census expert Doug Norris, chief demographer at Environics Analytics, points to StatCan's recent use of crowd-sourced data on cannabis prices as an example of the kind of innovation in data collection techniques that will be increasingly vital as the federal agency adapts to technological and social change to carry out its mandate in the future.

In their examination of the changing ways in which labour statistics have been gathered and interpreted in Canada, StatCan analysts Martha Patterson, Myriam Hazel and Dylan Saunders explain how traditional tracking of work activity is being augmented by new approaches. "Statistics Canada continues to build on these existing labour market measures to better capture the impact of globalization, technological change and digitalization on the nature and quality of work," they observe. "In 2017, it was one of the first national statistical agencies to release survey-based employment estimates on the 'gig' economy."

Meanwhile, Raymond Théberge and Robert J. Talbot — respectively the Commissioner of Official Languages of Canada and the research manager in the commissioner's office — explain how shifting demographics have long shaped public discussion and policymaking around official languages. They also warn that "the recent rise of populist majoritarian discourse," in Canada and around the world, has "implications for linguistic minorities everywhere."

Finally, StatCan analyst Katherine Wall builds a strong case for the use of administrative data gathered from postsecondary institutions and other sources to shed light on education and employment trends among women in the STEM fields (science, technology, engineering and mathematics and computer science) — an important indicator of ongoing progress in the struggle for gender equality in Canada. She concludes: "In a context where response rates to many surveys are in decline, administrative data are a key part of the present and future of Statistics Canada research."

Collectively, the essays published in this volume serve as a testament to the fundamental contribution Statistics Canada has made to the country's development over the past century, and emphasize the urgent need for ongoing innovation, adaptation and modernization as Canada's chief data-gathering agency charts the course of its next 100 years.

Perhaps a future grandson or great-granddaughter of mine — whether still knocking on doors to gather bits of information directly from Canadians, or analyzing data streamed automatically and instantly to StatCan via the neural networks of a deeply digitized world — will carry on our family tradition of helping to take the measure of the nation.