

---

# Balancing the Protection of Confidentiality with the Needs for Disaggregated Census Data

Census of Population, 2021



Release date: March 30, 2022

---

---

## How to obtain more information

For information about this product or the wide range of services and data available from Statistics Canada, visit our website, [www.statcan.gc.ca](http://www.statcan.gc.ca).

You can also contact us by

**Email at** [infostats@statcan.gc.ca](mailto:infostats@statcan.gc.ca)

**Telephone**, from Monday to Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., at the following numbers:

- Statistical Information Service 1-800-263-1136
- National telecommunications device for the hearing impaired 1-800-363-7629
- Fax line 1-514-283-9350

### **Depository Services Program**

- Inquiries line 1-800-635-7943
- Fax line 1-800-565-7757

## Standards of service to the public

Statistics Canada is committed to serving its clients in a prompt, reliable and courteous manner. To this end, Statistics Canada has developed standards of service that its employees observe. To obtain a copy of these service standards, please contact Statistics Canada toll-free at 1-800-263-1136. The service standards are also published on [www.statcan.gc.ca](http://www.statcan.gc.ca) under "Contact us" > "[Standards of service to the public.](#)"

## Note of appreciation

Canada owes the success of its statistical system to a long-standing partnership between Statistics Canada, the citizens of Canada, its businesses, governments and other institutions. Accurate and timely statistical information could not be produced without their continued co-operation and goodwill.

Published by authority of the Minister responsible for Statistics Canada

© Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada as represented by the Minister of Industry, 2022

All rights reserved. Use of this publication is governed by the Statistics Canada [Open Licence Agreement](#).

**An [HTML version](#) is also available.**

*Cette publication est aussi disponible en français.*

---

Release date: March 30, 2022

Catalogue number 98-26-0005, issue 2021001

---

# Balancing the Protection of Confidentiality with the Needs for Disaggregated Census Data, Census of Population, 2021

## Table of contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	4
<b>Protecting privacy</b> .....	4
<b>Balancing privacy with granular statistical information</b> .....	4
<b>Gender</b> .....	5
What's new for the 2021 Census? .....	5
Why add this new information and who will use it? .....	5
How will confidentiality and the need for disaggregated data be balanced? .....	5
<b>Ethnocultural diversity and religion</b> .....	6
What's new for the 2021 Census? .....	6
Why add this new information and who will use it? .....	6
How will confidentiality and the need for disaggregated data be balanced? .....	7
<b>Instruction in the official minority language</b> .....	7
What's new for the 2021 Census? .....	7
Why add this new information and who will use it? .....	7
How will confidentiality and the need for disaggregated data be balanced? .....	8
<b>Indigenous peoples</b> .....	8
What's new for the 2021 Census? .....	8
Why add this new information and who will use it? .....	8
How will confidentiality and the need for disaggregated data be balanced? .....	8
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	9

## Balancing the Protection of Confidentiality with the Needs for Disaggregated Census Data, Census of Population, 2021

### Introduction

The Census of Population provides a detailed and comprehensive statistical portrait that is an essential tool for understanding Canada. A primary goal of the dissemination of the Census of Population is to ensure that census products and services meet the primary needs of data users. To accomplish this, the 2021 Census of Population will offer many products and services designed to present a wide range of census information, including detailed population and dwelling counts, and granular data by geography, variable and topic.

Statistics Canada is increasing the value it delivers to data users by placing a greater emphasis on publishing more detailed (“disaggregated”) data tables, both across the agency and for the census. Census data, the most comprehensive source of robust information at low-level geographies, is essential for evidence-based decision making. Statistics Canada has always protected the privacy and confidentiality of Canadians, and will continue doing so with its rollout of disaggregated data—an important initiative to better tell the story of the country and its people. This document discusses how Statistics Canada balances the protection of confidentiality and the needs for disaggregated census data, with specific attention to new 2021 Census content.<sup>1</sup>

### Protecting privacy

Statistics Canada has always taken the privacy of Canadians and the protection of their confidential data very seriously. Statistics Canada is bound by the *Statistics Act*, a federal law, to not only collect and publish statistical information, but also ensure that privacy and data are protected at all times. Simply put, **Statistics Canada is committed to keeping the data of Canadians safe and will never release information that makes it possible to identify individual respondents or their characteristics**. The process of protecting individual respondent responses (i.e., protecting Canadians’ privacy) is referred to as **confidentiality**. Statistics Canada uses state-of-the-art tools, software and statistical methods—such as random rounding, aggregation and suppression—to ensure that published census data protects individuals’ privacy and that the identity and characteristics of respondents are not disclosed.

### Balancing privacy with granular statistical information

Content collected through the census allows for the publication of very granular and disaggregated data. Variables such as age, gender and use of official languages are collected for all individuals from all households. Information on ethnic, cultural and religious diversity, for example, is collected for individuals from approximately one in four households. Census variables can be combined to form a very complete socioeconomic picture that can be disaggregated to better understand Canada’s diversity at a granular level.

Trust has always been the foundation of how Statistics Canada operates. It is critical to the collection of vital census data used by communities, businesses and governments. Trust is about keeping data safe. Statistics Canada keeps the data of Canadians safe by employing statistical disclosure control methods such as limiting content, suppressing, rounding or aggregating data, just to name a few. Trust is also about ensuring that various government departments, communities, academics and the general public have the data they require. To provide the high-quality statistical information that is required to make evidence-based decisions across Canada, the above-mentioned methods are applied only as necessary to ensure census products continue to provide the most reliable and disaggregated statistical portrait possible.

---

1. For more information on the new and updated content of the 2021 Census, please refer to the five fact sheets and three technical reports found on [The road to the 2021 Census](#) web page.

# Balancing the Protection of Confidentiality with the Needs for Disaggregated Census Data, Census of Population, 2021

While the general principles of confidentiality described above apply to all data published by Statistics Canada, the sections below discuss their impact on the dissemination of specific census population characteristics, such as gender, Indigenous peoples, ethnic or cultural origins, groups designated as visible minorities, religion, and instruction in the minority official language.

## Gender

### What's new for the 2021 Census?

A new question on gender was introduced in the 2021 Census so that more Canadians could see themselves in their census data, and to meet new data needs and adapt to societal changes. It allows for the dissemination of information on transgender and non-binary populations. Beginning in 2021, a three-category gender question (male, female or a space where respondents can describe their gender) was asked of all Canadians. The historical question on sex has also been modified to ask about sex at birth, for added precision. Consequently, no information is lost compared with previous censuses. These two questions allow for a two-step approach to collect reliable statistical information on how Canadians choose to describe their gender.

### Why add this new information and who will use it?

These changes are in accordance with recent amendments to the *Canadian Human Rights Act* and the *Criminal Code* in June 2017, which added gender expression and identity to the list of prohibited grounds of discrimination. This new information is also consistent with the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat's Policy Direction to Modernize the Government of Canada's Sex and Gender Information Practices.

In addition to legislative and policy changes, the updated question on sex and the new question on gender included in the 2021 Census were informed by public feedback on the 2016 Census and other social surveys, as well as input from experts in the field of gender identity and members of the transgender and non-binary communities.

These data will ensure that all Canadians are represented, including the transgender and non-binary communities. The information will be used by governments (for example, through the federal government's LGBTQ2 Secretariat) and other organizations to make evidence-based decisions to promote equality for the transgender and non-binary populations, protect their rights, meet their needs and address discrimination against members of these communities.

### How will confidentiality and the need for disaggregated data be balanced?

To maintain the balance between disseminating as much gender-based data as possible and preserving confidentiality, some information from the 2021 Census will be released at higher levels of geography using a three-category gender variable with the following categories:

- men (cisgender and transgender)
- women (cisgender and transgender)
- non-binary persons.

Given that the non-binary population is small, when necessary, a statistical method producing a two-category gender variable will be applied to prevent disclosure of identifiable data for lower levels of geography.

# Balancing the Protection of Confidentiality with the Needs for Disaggregated Census Data, Census of Population, 2021

Consequently, in these cases, information will be disseminated using the following categories:

- men+
- women+.

Individuals in the “non-binary persons” category are distributed in the other two gender categories and are denoted by the “+” symbol.

At higher levels of geography that allow for data disaggregation while maintaining confidentiality, certain information will be released using a five-category classification of cisgender, transgender and non-binary populations. This is a derived variable that uses both three-category gender and sex at birth:

- cisgender men
- cisgender women
- transgender men
- transgender women
- non-binary persons.

## Ethnocultural diversity and religion

### What’s new for the 2021 Census?

Some key changes were made to the collection and dissemination of the ethnocultural diversity content for the 2021 Census. The ethnocultural diversity content of the census consists of questions on ethnic or cultural origins, population groups, and religion. For the revised question on ethnic or cultural origins, the short list of examples of ethnic or cultural origins provided directly in the questionnaire was replaced with a link to a list of over 500 examples. A similar approach was adopted for the revised religion question—the questionnaire provided a link to a list of over 200 examples of religions and denominations, while still including a short list of examples on the questionnaire. The revised approach for the 2021 Census, along with changing immigration patterns and increasing diversity in Canada, is expected to yield more varied and diverse responses than in past censuses. To better reflect the range of responses received, a greater number of ethnic or cultural origins, and religions and denominations will be disseminated for the 2021 Census.

To preserve the relevance, historical comparability and overall quality of the data on groups designated as visible minorities, and to ensure that legislative and policy requirements continue to be met, the wording of the population group question was not changed in the 2021 Census questionnaire. However, more disaggregated data will be disseminated through various products, including data tables, data visualizations and analytical products. For example, further information will be provided on each group designated as a visible minority by cross-tabulating each group with other characteristics such as ethnic or cultural origins, gender, or age. In addition, a revised version of the population group variable will provide more detailed information on the population who reported multiple responses.

### Why add this new information and who will use it?

Data are used by governments, businesses, community groups, health care providers, researchers and a variety of organizations throughout the country to better understand the experiences and challenges of several population groups in Canada, to support the equitable delivery of programs and services, and to track progress toward a more fair and inclusive society.

# Balancing the Protection of Confidentiality with the Needs for Disaggregated Census Data, Census of Population, 2021

This information helps meet the longstanding and widespread demand for information about the origins and diversity of Canada's population, and the need to provide information on population groups designated as visible minorities in support of the *Employment Equity Act*.

Furthermore, the data are used to inform federal multiculturalism programs and policies and support the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act*, the *Canadian Human Rights Act*, and the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. This information is also used by various community organizations, such as religious denominations and cultural associations.

## How will confidentiality and the need for disaggregated data be balanced?

The most detailed data available on population groups, ethnic or cultural origins, and religion will be provided at the lowest levels of geography that do not compromise data quality or disclose confidential data.

Given the potentially small estimates for specific groups at lower levels of geography or the combination of layers of intersectionality, further aggregation of categories may be necessary. For example, a specific group may be included with other categories (e.g., "not included elsewhere," "other") or may be presented at the aggregate level of the classification. Alternatively, other characteristics, such as age groups, income or occupation, could be aggregated instead of the ethnocultural or religious characteristics.

## Instruction in the official minority language

### What's new for the 2021 Census?

In response to recommendations formulated in 2017 by the House of Commons of Canada Standing Committee on Official Languages, and following various requests for new information on the number of children eligible for instruction in the official minority language, five new questions on the language of instruction were added to the 2021 Census.

The questions differ according to the respondent's place of residence (Quebec or the other provinces and territories). For Canada outside of Quebec, the purpose of the questions is to determine whether the respondents have had elementary or secondary education in French in Canada and, if applicable, in what type of program. For those who were in a regular French program, an additional question asks for the number of years of study spent in this type of program. For residents of Quebec, the questions establish whether the respondents had elementary or secondary education in an English-language school in Canada and, if so, for how many years.

### Why add this new information and who will use it?

The data obtained from the new questions on the language of instruction in the 2021 Census will constitute one of the pillars of the data ecosystem Statistics Canada is developing on children eligible for instruction in the official minority language, under section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. These data will be used by departments of education, school boards and communities to plan education services in the minority language.

The process that led to the addition of these questions is presented in detail in the document entitled [Minority language educational rights: Technical report on changes for the 2021 Census](#), Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-20-0002.

# Balancing the Protection of Confidentiality with the Needs for Disaggregated Census Data, Census of Population, 2021

## How will confidentiality and the need for disaggregated data be balanced?

Since the need for data on the language of instruction involves educational services such as schools, the data must be disaggregated by geographic area, then by age, to distinguish between elementary- and secondary-school children. Furthermore, the data needs often involve small populations, sometimes spread throughout the territory. Conscious of this need, Statistics Canada will produce data tables for various geographic levels, such as provinces and territories, metropolitan areas, or municipalities. By applying confidentiality rules to the data, including the use of rounded counts, Statistics Canada will ensure that it is impossible to use the data on language of instruction to identify individuals or particular families.

## Indigenous peoples

### What's new for the 2021 Census?

The 2021 Census includes two new questions that allow Métis and Inuit to identify themselves further.

One new question asks whether a person is a registered member of a Métis organization or Settlement. It includes five checkboxes for the current signatories of the Canada-Métis Nation Accord: the Métis Nation of Ontario, the Manitoba Metis Federation, the Métis Nation—Saskatchewan, the Métis Nation of Alberta and the Métis Nation British Columbia. It also includes a text box to allow respondents to specify a Métis organization or Settlement not otherwise listed.

The other new question asks whether a person is enrolled under, or a beneficiary of, an Inuit land claims agreement. It includes four checkboxes for the current Inuit land claims agreements: the Inuvialuit Final Agreement, the Nunavut Agreement, the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement, and the Labrador Inuit Land Claims Agreement. It also includes a text box to allow respondents to specify an agreement not otherwise listed.

### Why add this new information and who will use it?

These two new questions help fill information gaps identified during engagement sessions with First Nations, Métis and Inuit organizations, governments and communities. In addition to allowing Inuit and Métis to identify themselves further, the new questions will support evidence-based decision making by Métis and Inuit governments. For the first time, Métis governments will have access to sociodemographic information about the Métis citizens they serve. Inuit governments will also have access to granular sociodemographic information about Inuit living outside Inuit Nunangat who are enrolled under, or beneficiaries of, specific land claims agreements.

The new information on Métis will be used by the Government of Canada and Métis governments, including Métis organizations that are signatories of the Canada-Métis Nation Accord and the eight Métis Settlements. The new information on Inuit will be used by Inuit governments in the four Inuit regions of Inuvialuit, Nunavut, Nunavik and Nunatsiavut, and by the Government of Canada, which has obligations toward Inuit under land claims agreements.

The new disaggregated information on Métis and Inuit adds to the disaggregated information on First Nations people that was already available and will bring more balanced content for all three Indigenous groups. The information on all three Indigenous groups will be used by researchers, policy makers and the general public to better understand the realities of First Nations people, Métis and Inuit in Canada.

## How will confidentiality and the need for disaggregated data be balanced?

The census is Statistics Canada's only comprehensive source of data for Indigenous communities. The new disaggregated data will address information needs identified by Indigenous governments, organizations and communities. The privacy and confidentiality of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit respondents—as with all census respondents—and their personal information will be safeguarded.

# Balancing the Protection of Confidentiality with the Needs for Disaggregated Census Data, Census of Population, 2021

Therefore, information from the 2021 Census will be released using all available categories, including the following:

- First Nations
- Métis
- Inuit
- the non-Indigenous population.

However, given potentially small counts for some groups, aggregation to prevent disclosure of identifiable data may be necessary. This could happen, for example, when data are presented by age, gender, income group, occupation and other socioeconomic characteristics. Nevertheless, priority will be given to releasing information for all Indigenous groups, and combining categories related to socioeconomic characteristics will be considered only when necessary.

## Conclusion

This document provides a discussion of an essential role of Statistics Canada: balancing the protection of confidentiality with the needs for disaggregated data, both in general and for the census. It serves as a preview of the dissemination strategy for specific population characteristics such as gender, Indigenous peoples, ethnic or cultural origins, groups designated as visible minorities, religion, and instruction in the minority official language.

Overall, the 2021 Census of Population will offer many products containing very granular and disaggregated data, including new detailed information (e.g., regarding gender and Indigenous peoples). This will be accomplished while ensuring the confidentiality of Canadians' data. Furthermore, any requests for custom data tabulations will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis in a manner consistent with the dual need to produce disaggregated, granular data and to protect confidentiality.

For more information on the 2021 Census of Population, please refer to the [Census Program](#) website and to the [Guide to the Census of Population, 2021](#), Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 98-304-X.

For further information on the variables and classifications disseminated for the 2021 Census, please refer to the [Dictionary, Census of Population, 2021](#), Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 98-301-X.