Summary of the Evaluation of Statistics Canada's 2021 Census of Population: Innovation Activities

The 2021 Census of Population was Canada's 23rd national census. The COVID-19 pandemic emerged in Canada in early 2020 and affected all steps of the 2021 Census process, from data collection to dissemination. In light of this, the Census Program undertook an extensive review of its operations to adjust its plans and procedures to ensure the continuity of census activities while protecting the safety of all Canadians and its employees. This included, among others, focusing on contactless approaches (e.g., electronic questionnaire and telephone follow-up), revising engagement and communication efforts, and introducing remote work. Moreover, changes in content and analysis were incorporated into released products to enhance the understanding of the pandemic's effects on various census topics.

In addition to these adjustments, the Census Program also continued its pursuit of innovation through research and development, as well as the implementation of new and existing innovation projects aimed at maintaining a high level of data quality, supporting data relevance, achieving a high response rate, reducing respondent burden, and improving efficiency and cost-effectiveness. Innovations occurred in all stages of the 2021 Census, from content determination to dissemination.

The evaluation was conducted in accordance with the Treasury Board's Policy on Results and Statistics Canada's Risk-Based Audit and Evaluation Plan (2023/2024 to 2027/2028). The objective of the evaluation is to provide credible and neutral information on the ongoing performance of the Census of Population and to identify potential areas to consider for the

next census cycle. The scope of the evaluation focused on the key innovations from the 2021 Census of Population and the lessons learned from these innovations to inform continuous improvement within the Census Program and the broader agency.

The evaluation methodology consisted of a document review, semi-structured interviews, and an internal survey. Interviews were conducted with representatives from the Census Program, subject-matter areas and other partners within Statistics Canada. The survey was sent to directors to gather insight on their experiences pertaining to innovations, best practices and lessons learned from the Census Program. The findings outlined in this report are based on the triangulation of these data collection methods.

Key findings and recommendations

The 2021 Census introduced a spectrum of innovations and process improvements, ranging from small advancements building on past successes to important breakthroughs. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, additional changes were implemented to help mitigate risks. Overall, the innovation activities contributed to the high performance of the 2021 Census and achievements in operational efficiency and effectiveness.

Notwithstanding the significant challenges introduced by COVID-19, the pandemic was an impetus for rapid and breakthrough change within the program. Building on the momentum of COVID-19, leveraging success factors (e.g., buy-in, dedication, strong governance and project management) and learning from challenges (e.g., rigid timelines, last-minute changes, unanticipated complexities) will support the Census Program going forward.

The Census Program has effective debriefing and governance mechanisms to support the identification of best practices and lessons learned at the end of each cycle. Guided by these activities, Census Project Team has a defined vision for 2026 and is already working on improving its processes. Some felt that the post-cycle debriefings could be improved by enhancing communication across project teams and key stakeholders to support awareness of the next steps, and by focusing on a more continuous documentation of lessons learned across the cycle to ensure the timely identification and planning of innovations for the next census. More broadly, staff reported barriers to moving from innovative ideas to execution. The formalization of Census Futures is expected to help the program to overcome some of the barriers to engaging in long-term innovation planning.

Across the agency, there are some mechanisms for knowledge exchange between the Census Program and other areas, both formally and informally. Generally, the Census Program is seen as a driver for innovation within the agency, as investments in new processes and tools can be leveraged for wider benefit. However, representatives within and outside the program agreed that learning across the agency could be improved. This could include exploring structured and dedicated forums for innovation sharing and investigating opportunities such as employee rotations, innovation-focused communities of practice and learning symposiums.

Considering these findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

Recommendation 1

The Assistant Chief Statistician (ACS) of Census, Regional Services and Operations (Field 7) should ensure continued support of the activities of the Census Futures subproject to facilitate the timely advancement of long-term and breakthrough innovation projects.

Recommendation 2

The ACS of Field 7 should ensure that mechanisms for the continuous and ongoing documentation of lessons learned throughout the census cycle are explored to support the timely identification and planning of innovations for the next cycle.

Recommendation 3

The ACS of Field 7 should ensure that internal communication around decisions on innovations and improvements is enhanced so that all stakeholders are aware and interdependencies are understood.

Recommendation 4

The ACS of Field 7, in collaboration with other ACSs, should ensure that mechanisms are explored to further support knowledge exchange between the Census Program and other parts of the agency regarding innovation activities (in both directions).

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