

# Submission to the Finance Committee, Parliament of Canada

## Regarding the 2017 Federal Budget

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on behalf of some members of Canada's Research Community

**Background** – The Federal Government will likely be tabling amendments to the Statistics Act early in early Fall 2016. A number of leading academic researchers and leaders of major health and social science research organizations in Canada came together to discuss and determine if there was a consensus, in the context of Statistics Act amendments, for major improvements over the status quo. At a Workshop held in Montreal on July 27<sup>th</sup>, a consensus quickly emerged.

Based on the results of this Workshop, we are very enthusiastic about the potential of Statistics Act amendments to improve substantially the breadth, quality, international stature, and general salience of the research and analysis that can be produced. The goal of any reform should be to support the new Federal Government's pledge to improve the quality and use of evidence to support public policy and governance for Canada.

However, amendments to the Statistics Act alone are insufficient to meet the needs and vision for world class research and analysis in Canada, especially in the areas of health and social science. For that reason, we are pleased to make this submission to the Finance Committee in its preparations for the Spring 2017 Federal Budget.

Our group had access to a document authored within Statistics Canada entitled "Creating a Modern Framework for an Independent National Statistical Office" (Version 14 dated 2016-5-16). This "Modernization" document contains a wide range of very valuable proposals. In our consensus discussion, the group focused on aspects related to enabling and facilitating bona fide research and analysis undertaken outside of Statistics Canada (i.e. by individuals other than regular employees of Statistics Canada). Most of the group's recommendations concern the federal Statistics Act itself.

We are still finalizing our summary consensus text. So to meet the Finance Committee's August 5<sup>th</sup> deadline for submissions, we highlight below the essence of the two consensus recommendations where new Federal funding in the forthcoming Budget would be essential. We and / or our colleagues would also welcome the opportunity to testify before the Finance Committee in order to expand on the rather summary text herein.

The general objective of enhanced funding is to give effect to broadening Statistics Canada's mandate and its ability to partner effectively with the bona fide research and analysis community, both in Canada and internationally. One central aspect of a modernized Statistics Act would emphasize that Statistics Canada's raw microdata plus associated informatics and related capacities can serve far better as critical

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infrastructure that generates widespread positive benefits when better used by researchers and analysts external to Statistics Canada. Given its national mandate founded in the Constitution, Statistics Canada should be a key contributor to and effective partner for research, analysis, and innovation. Indeed, Statistics Canada should be seen not only as an essential national source for the production of critical evidence and knowledge, but also as having a duty to support and enable the broader ecosystem of bona fide external research, analysis and innovation.

**Budget Proposals** In this context, we offer two budgetary recommendations:

First, a modernized Federal Statistics Act should be accompanied by appropriately scaled and targeted increases in the Statistics Canada budget. Key elements requiring enhanced funding include:

- creating and maintaining research- and analysis-ready microdata sets,
- funding processes to qualify and audit bona fide researchers and bona fide research-based organizations,
- establishing data sharing agreements, and
- improving access to data including via the creation of secure real time remote access methodologies.

Second, a fully-funded collaborative and/or consultative process involving leading academic researchers and leaders of major health and social science research organizations in Canada should be established to articulate a Data Strategy for Canada. The Data Strategy will identify essential activities, such as training the next generation of data scientists, that are complementary to the modernization of the Act.

It should be noted that this process will likely identify gaps and failures of coordination with regard to the general funding of social and health science data infrastructure in Canada, with implications for the granting councils (SSHRC, CIHR, and NSERC), CFI and Genome Canada, as well as serious lacunae in Canada's post-secondary education regarding the training of a new cadre of "data scientists".