

Statscan to drop pay wall - Globe and Mail Blog

Posted on Thursday, December 1, 2011 11:06AM EST

If Canada is to morph into a knowledge-based economy, its citizens need better access to reliable, unbiased information.

With that in mind, Statistics Canada will make all of its standard data available for free on its website, starting next year. As of Feb. 1, all data known as Canadian Socio-Economic Information Management System (or CANSIM) will be posted freely on the agency's website. Census and geography data will also become free.

The move aligns Statscan with statistical agencies in other advanced economies, and means everyone from non-profits to municipal economists, policy makers and curious individuals will no longer have to pay to access detailed information.

Before this decision, Statscan charged for the information, meaning costs could range from a few dollars to tens of thousands for data. This move will make it easier to access detailed information on, say, income levels or family composition, right down to the neighbourhood level.

"In order to make its data more accessible to Canadians, organizations and businesses, Statistics Canada will make CANSIM data and self-serve standard products, including Census data and geography products, free of charge on the Internet," said Gabrielle Beaudoin, director of Statscan's communications division, in an e-mailed statement.

Canadians will have much better access to census data. The first 2011 census release, on population and dwellings, will be released on Feb. 8, 2012. "From that point forward, most census products will be free for self-serve on the Internet site," the agency said.

It's a welcome move for an agency in turmoil last year after a federal government decision to scrap the mandatory long-form census in favour of a new, voluntary household survey. Response rates to the new survey, conducted this year, were 69.3 per cent. Critics said the move will degrade the quality of information on Canadian society, while the government said a mandatory long form was too intrusive.

Statscan expects the change to cost the agency about \$2-million. It comes even as Statscan, like other government agencies, is facing budgetary cuts in the years ahead.

Proponents of the move have argued for years that Statscan should make its data free, bringing it in line with other statistical agencies, including the United States.

One of the biggest benefits "is that the range of people who can use Statscan data to make informed decision and figure out what's going on in the country dramatically increases," said David Eaves, Vancouver-based public policy expert and open data activist. Better-informed public policy should result, he added.