



## **Toward an Inclusive Health and Healthcare Data Framework for Jews in Canada**

Adopted by the Canadian Federation of Jewish Medical Associations, July 17, 2024

The collection of sociodemographic data in health care services, research, and operations is a growing norm and good practice in Canada. Collecting sociodemographic data in a way that is itself inclusive, non-discriminatory, and affirming of all identities is itself a substantial challenge. In this context, various data collection and governance frameworks have been developed and proposed to serve marginalized communities and people facing health inequities. This development has taken place partly because many marginalized communities have experienced serious harms arising from the collection and misuse of sociodemographic and identity-based health data.

Jews in Canada carry a cultural memory of serious harms associated with the collection and operationalization of Jewish identity data by health services and state organizations. This history is global and local, contemporary and multigenerational. With few exceptions, Jews are seldom engaged or consulted in the development of these survey instruments. As a consequence, contemporary socio-demographic data tools in widespread use by health service organizations, health researchers, and health professional organizations continue to entrench and reinforce harms. This document serves as notice for all organizations, researchers, and agencies regarding pervasive deficiencies and embedded antisemitism in other common socio-demographic data collection questionnaires.

In this context, the Canadian Federation of Jewish Medical Associations is launching efforts to improve the way that data concerning Jews in healthcare is gathered, governed, and interpreted. This effort will be an iterative and consultative process that will take some time. Community engagement and data governance recommendations will emerge from it. However, more complex data governance processes need not impede the immediate implementation of better practices that allow Jews to self-identify appropriately on existing surveys. For this reason, we are immediately releasing recommended questions to enable inclusivity of Jews in Canadian socio-demographic data collection.

### *Standard and good practices for Inclusive socio-demographic data questions*

To identify Jews, it has become standard practice in Canadian social science to rely on some variant of decennial census questions on religion and ethnicity. The census questions are bolded below:

**1. What were the ethnic or cultural origins of this person’s ancestors?**

**Ancestors may have Indigenous origins, or origins that refer to different countries, or other origins that may not refer to different countries.**

For examples of ethnic or cultural origins, visit [www12.statcan.gc.ca/ancestry](http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/ancestry).

Respondents are permitted to select up to six ancestries, one of which may be “Jewish.” Survey

researchers often reword this question as “Please identify your ethnic or cultural origin” or “What are your ethnic or cultural origins?” We recommend that surveys provide access to the entire list of examples of ethnic or cultural origins. If limited by space or other constraints, the entire census list of ethnic or cultural origin options may be replaced by examples of ethnic or cultural origins, but should include “Jewish.” It is important to note that the latter approach is not best practice in collecting data for ethnic or cultural origin. If it is the practice of your organization to include a shorter aggregated list for ethnic or cultural origin groups, we recommend using the following examples: Jewish (Sephardi, Mizrahi, Beta Yisrael, Ashkenazi, etc.)

## 2. What is this person’s religion?

**Indicate a specific denomination or religion even if this person is not currently a practising member of that group. For example, Roman Catholic, United Church, Anglican, Muslim, Baptist, Hindu, Pentecostal, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Sikh, Buddhist, Jewish, Greek Orthodox, etc.**

**For additional examples of denominations and religions, visit [www12.statcan.gc.ca/religion-e](http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/religion-e).**

Survey researchers often reword this question as “Please identify your religion even if you do not practice it” or “What is your religion?” We recommend that the full list of religions be made available. If a reduced list is provided as above, we recommend that Jewish always be included on the list of examples of religious identities.

Because people may use religious, ethnic, *or* cultural criteria to self-identify as Jewish, the consensus in Canadian social science since the 1990s has been to define Canadians as Jews if

- (1) they state their religion as Jewish, OR
- (2) they state that they have no religion but also state that their ethnicity or culture is Jewish (Torczyner and Brotman 1995; Shahar 2023).

This definition has come to be known as the “standard definition.” Excluded from the standard definition are individuals who state that they identify with a non-Jewish religion but nonetheless consider themselves Jewish by ethnicity or culture. Recent research has, however, underlined the value of including individuals of the latter type in an “expanded definition” of Jewish (Brym, forthcoming 2024).

While there may be value in using this broader definition, we do not prejudge the superiority of one definition over the other. Nor is it important to do so at this time because counts of Jews using both definitions can be derived from variants of the two census questions bolded above. What is important in our view is that the two census questions or variants be collected in health and healthcare so they will not be regarded as idiosyncratic or invalid from the point of view of census and social science norms.

We note in conclusion that, like standard survey questions, both questions should include “don’t know” and “prefer not to disclose” options. Moreover, we recommend that an “other” response option be avoided because it would have the immediate effect of “othering” the respondent’s identity.

We note that Jewish should not be an option on any question related to race. The term “race” was abandoned in the 1951 census of Canada because of the harms caused by Nazi racial theory in the first

half of the twentieth century. It is still avoided. Most Jews are still averse to being classified as members of a race.

### **References**

Brym, Robert. Forthcoming 2024. Counting Canada's Jews in the era of secularization. *Canadian Jewish Studies/Études juives canadiennes* (39).

Shahar, Charles. 2023. *2021: The Jewish Population of Canada*. Toronto: Jewish Federations of Canada.

Torczyner, Jim L. and Shari L. and Brotman 1995. The Jews of Canada: A profile from the census. *The American Jewish Year Book 1995*. New York: Springer, 227-260.