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### The Handling of Written Inquiries Received by the Division of Building Research

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# NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL OF CANADA

## DIVISION OF BUILDING RESEARCH

No.

594

# TECHNICAL NOTE

DBR/NRC

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APPROVED BY C.B.C.

DATE August 1975

PREPARED FOR record purposes - for DBR internal use

SUBJECT THE HANDLING OF WRITTEN INQUIRIES RECEIVED BY THE DIVISION OF  
BUILDING RESEARCH

The first inquiry to the Division was received 28 years ago, on 2 April 1948. This inquiry came, appropriately enough, via C.R. Crocker who was then with NRC's Technical Information Service. Shortly after, Bob Crocker joined the Division to head what was known as the Inquiry Section, later renamed the Building Practice Section.

For several years, personnel of the Building Practice Section answered almost all the inquiries, largely on the basis of library searches. Gradually, however, with the development of expertise in the Division, more and more of the inquiries were handled by research officers. In 1973, a definite operating policy (Appendix I) was established whereby members of the research sections assumed a major role in answering written inquiries.

All written inquiries are given a number and filed chronologically. Each inquiry is classified according to geographical location, type of inquirer and subject; this information is maintained and tabulated annually. In addition, for several years a card index was kept in which all inquiries were filed according to the name of the company, association or individual that had sent in the request for information. About 1971 this practice was abandoned in favour of preparing summary cards of selected inquiries filed in the DBR abstract card catalogue.

The vast amount of information stored in the more than 20,000\* written inquiries received since 1948, represents not only a great deal of effort by Divisional personnel but also a storehouse of knowledge that can be used in answering future requests for information. These inquiries also provide a means of assessing the changing needs of the construction industry as well as of assessing the Division's performance in serving this industry. Where have the inquiries come from? Who has been served? Has the subject matter of inquiries changed over the years? Can improvements be made in the handling of inquiries? In order to answer these questions, an elementary statistical analysis was made of the data stored in the files.

The first part of this report summarizes the results of this analysis. All inquiries received during a 9-year period (from 1965 to 1973) were analyzed in detail, along with a check analysis of one year (1955) from the earlier records. The results of this analysis are used in the second part of this report as a basis for suggestions for the future handling of inquiries.

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\* This total does not include inquiries handled by Regional Stations except where a written inquiry has been referred to Ottawa by one of the stations, nor does it include routine requests for DBR publications or requests for inter-library loans.

## ANALYSIS OF INQUIRIES

### 1. Total Number of Inquiries

The total number of written inquiries received by DBR is given in Table 1.

Table 1 - Total Written Inquiries Received at DBR

	1955		1965	1966	1967	1968	1969	1970	1971	1972	1973
Canadian	581		774	730	789	790	659	545	644	763	592
Foreign	63		119	102	156	147	133	92	103	151	88
French Language	27		44	46	55	38	50	42	39	66	64

The total number of inquiries has remained fairly constant over the years: Canadian inquiries fluctuated between about 600 to 800 per year, with foreign inquiries averaging about 10-15 per cent of the total inquiries received. There has been a gradual increase in the number of inquiries received in the French language (4.6% in 1955, 5.8% in 1965, and 10.9% in 1973 of the total Canadian inquiries). It is interesting to note that 20 years ago, long before the official bilingual program in Canada, essentially all of the French language inquiries were answered in French.

The total number of inquiries appear to fluctuate with the amount of construction activity; the smaller number of inquiries received during 1969-71 coincides with a period of relatively low construction activity in Canada<sup>1</sup>. The foreign inquiries also appear to follow generally this same pattern of fluctuation.

The totals given in Table 1 are influenced by many variables, such as the activities of various individuals within DBR, the increase in northern development resulting in a marked increase in geotechnical inquiries, the reliability and use of the postal service, the publicity given to DBR by seminars, the availability of information (for example, the fact that many requests for information can now be answered by publications without a formal inquiry). Nevertheless, the number of written inquiries

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<sup>1</sup> Construction in Canada - Statistics Canada

has not increased markedly from over the number received twenty years ago, when the amount of construction activity was much less than it is now. If anything, the number of inquiries appears to have been decreasing since 1969.

## 2. Geographical Distribution of Inquiries

The inquiries classified according to geographical regions in Canada are presented and compared to population percentages in Table 2.

Table 2 - Geographical Distribution of Canadian Inquiries

	Per Cent of Total Canadian Inquiries										Per Cent of Total Population
	1955	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969	1970	1971	1972	1973	
Ontario	39.0	41.0	45.3	40.2	44.5	44.5	41.0	47.0	33.0	41.5	37
Quebec	22.0	23.2	24.0	25.3	18.2	24.0	24.3	20.1	23.0	23.0	28
Prairie Provinces	18.0	20.0	14.0	16.9	17.7	16.4	15.4	17.9	20.0	20.0	16
British Columbia	13.0	7.4	7.6	8.7	9.3	7.4	8.2	7.5	7.8	5.9	9
Atlantic Provinces	8.0	7.9	8.5	8.3	9.8	7.6	10.4	6.6	8.5	8.4	9
N.W.T. & Yukon	.5	.5	.6	.6	.5	.1	.7	.9	1.7	1.2	<1

The percentage of inquiries coming from the different regions in Canada has remained remarkably constant over the years. The inquiries received from Ontario are somewhat higher than would be expected from its percentage of the population of Canada. This is not surprising, however, considering that DBR headquarters is located in this province and the close liaison DBR has with many Federal agencies in Ottawa. The proportion of inquiries received from Quebec are somewhat lower, but still represent a fair percentage of the total number of inquiries.

The percentage of inquiries received from the Prairie Provinces, British Columbia and the Atlantic Provinces are approximately equal to their percentages of the total population. If the written inquiries from the Regional Stations were included in this analysis, the total number from these regions would exceed the percentage one would expect according to population. (According to J.J. Hamilton\* (Head of the Prairie Regional Station), PRS receives about 100 written inquiries per year.)

\* Verbal communication

The 9-year average of the per cent of the total inquiries according to region, plotted on Figure 1, summarizes graphically the data in Table 2. Figure 2 shows that there is no marked trend over the past 9 years (using 3-year averages) in inquiries received from various regions.

### 3. Inquiries from Major Cities

Figure 3 shows the 3-year average number of inquiries from major cities in Canada from 1965 to 1973. The only significant change is the marked decrease in inquiries from Montreal and Toronto. In both these cities, it is probable that the NRC Technical Information Services offices are handling more of the routine inquiries; in the case of Toronto, the Division's own Information Office, established in 1967, is undoubtedly responsible for the decrease in inquiries directed to Ottawa from that city. The number of written inquiries received from residents of the City of Ottawa has remained about the same since 1965. (A large number of the Ottawa inquiries are handled by telephone or personal calls to the Division.)

Figure 4 shows the trends of inquiries received from all regions in Canada, excluding the major cities.

### 4. Distribution According to Inquirer

The classification of inquiries according to the category of the inquirer is much more difficult than classification according to geographical location, as the inquiries come from a wide range of individuals and institutions. For the purposes of this analysis, inquirers have been classified in six categories (Table 3). The first three categories are the more specific technical inquiries; the last three are much more general technical inquiries.

The information contained in Table 3 is summarized in Figure 5 to show more clearly the trends.



Table 3 - Distribution of Inquiries According to Category of Inquirer

Specific Technical	3-Year Inquiry Totals			1-Year Total
	1965-1967	1968-1970	1971-1973	1954-1955
1. Consulting Engineers and Architects	595	479	331	111
2. Contractors, Builders, Supplier of Building Material	830	642	526	175
3. Government (Federal, Provincial, Municipal)	<u>333</u>	<u>266</u>	<u>294</u>	<u>86</u>
Total	1758	1387	1151	372
Average (Yearly)	585	462	383	
General				
4. Educational Institutions (including students)	137	123	215	17
5. Private Institutions (Hospitals, Real Estate, Insurance Companies)	145	237	210	69
6. Individuals (mostly Homeowners, no affiliation)	<u>635</u>	<u>619</u>	<u>760</u>	<u>185</u>
Total	917	979	1185	271
Average (Yearly)	305	326	392	

There appears to be a marked decrease in the number of specific technical inquiries and a marked increase in the more general type of inquiry, particularly from individuals. There are several possible reasons for this apparent trend:

- (1) Personal calls and telephone requests replacing written inquiries (particularly from Toronto and Montreal).
- (2) Possibly the individual sections are not sending in copies of all inquiries to the Information Services Group (a rough check of the Geotechnical Section, 1974 correspondence, indicated that from 30 to 40 requests for information were received which should have been classified as Technical Inquiries).
- (3) More technical information is available in the form of publications; consultants thus do not need to send specific written requests. In contrast, the information available to individuals on a wide variety of construction problems is not so readily available.

#### 5. Distribution According to Subject

The classification of inquiries according to subject is especially difficult because they deal with almost every aspect of construction as well as with subjects outside the fields of interest of the Division. Because of these difficulties, it was impossible to determine meaningful statistical relationships. All that was done was to list the inquiries handled by various sections to indicate the requests for information from different subject areas (Table 4).

The Technical Information Unit handled almost 40 per cent of the total inquiries; this reflects the large number of rather general technical inquiries received by the Division. The Geotechnical and Services Sections handled the largest number of written inquiries. It is surprising that three sections (Structures, Fire, Codes & Standards\*) handled so few inquiries. Between them, according to these statistics, they handled only two inquiries from consulting engineers and architects between 1 October 1973 and 30 September 1974.

A comparison of inquiries received twenty years ago (1955) with inquiries received last year indicates that a large proportion deal with the same subjects (condensation, paint, roofing, insulation, swimming pools), problems that continue to bother individuals, institutions, and to a lesser extent perhaps, consultants. The major change in recent years is the marked increase in geotechnical inquiries, reflecting the increased interest in northern development and snow and ice control. The inquiries also reflect current interest. For example, in the past year there have been numerous inquiries on solar heating of buildings and energy conservation for buildings. Many of these come from individual home owners rather than consulting firms. They often reflect public concern about topics that have been given a great deal of publicity in the media.

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\* Presumably, written technical inquiries dealing with Codes, a major concern of these sections, have not been classified as inquiries, with an inquiry number.



Table 4 - Inquiries - 1 October 1973 to 30 September 1974\*

SECTION	Engineers and Architects	Contractors, Builders, Suppliers	Government	Institutions (Research Universities, Hospitals)	Individuals	TOTAL
Technical Information Unit	19	40	7	34	142	242
Design and Use	16	17	1	8	12	54
Services	9	18	10	14	40	91
Geotechnical	24	12	17	19	29	101
Materials	8	15	7	8	17	55
Noise and Vibration	6	4	4	2	9	25
Structures	1	6	1		3	11
Fire	1	1	2		3	7
Codes and Standards		1	2	1	5	9
Director's Office	3	3	5	6	10	27
						622

\* Taken from 1975-76 Information Services Group Program Submission.

## THE HANDLING OF FUTURE INQUIRIES

### 1. Statistics of Inquiries

It is proposed to keep a simple statistical record of written inquiries on a monthly basis (Appendix II). At the end of each year, these will be compiled to give the statistics for a year. Although this type of data has limited value, it is useful in assessing the trends in inquiries. No attempt will be made to classify inquiries by subject, other than to keep track of inquiries handled by individual sections.

It would be useful if the Regional Stations were to keep a similar record so that future statistics could include their contributions. The Prairie Regional Station does keep a comparable record which they find useful. There might be some objections because it does involve more "paper work" but it would be valuable to have this input from the Regional Stations. It would be useful to have occasional "spot" surveys of inquiries such as that carried out in 1971 (Appendix III), including telephone inquiries as well as inquiries received by the Library, Publications and Regional Stations.

### 2. Handling Individual Inquiries

The requests for information from home owners, students, and other individuals are increasing. These inquiries are often difficult to handle because the enquirers frequently do not know what they want or, even more frequently, they ask for such general information that it is almost impossible to satisfy their request. Also, most of our publications, even the Canadian Building Digest series, are really not suitable for replying to requests from lay people. The Housing Notes and Better Building Bulletins are better for this audience.

There is a need for a series of standard, one- or two-page replies to many topics that keep recurring, such as, sound-proofing recreational rooms, building log cabins, treatment of concrete floors, construction of vegetable storage rooms in basements, preventing moss from growing on roofs, and many others too numerous to mention. The standard reply would give only the essence of the problem, with essential references and the address of agencies that should be contacted if the problem is outside DBR's field of interest.

Past inquiries could be used as a basis for compiling these short "information" notes. It will be quite a task, but a good "catalogue" of responses will facilitate the answering of inquiries and probably provide a better service to the public. It might even be feasible to publish the commonly recurring inquiries in the form of a simple "question and answer" series. The British Building

Research Station had such a series some years ago. The Technical Information Unit will look into such possibilities during the next few months.

### 3. Catalogue of Selected Inquiries

In addition to keeping a catalogue of questions and answers designed for the general public, it might be useful to compile each year, a catalogue of the more technical inquiries which would be useful for answering future requests. (It is estimated that only about 10-15 per cent of letter inquiries need to be filed in this manner.) These selected inquiries would have to be filed according to subject and author to be readily available for future reference. It is planned to examine the 1974 written inquiries to make a "trial" catalogue of selected inquiries to assess the usefulness of keeping such a record.

### 4. Research Officer Subject Profile

One problem associated with distributing inquiries to research officers for reply is to know who is best equipped to handle certain subjects, particularly if the inquiry is of a general nature. It would be useful to have a subject index of topics showing the interests of each research officer and the subjects for which he or she can supply informed replies. The Technical Information Unit is now compiling such an index, based on the profiles prepared in 1974 for the NRC pilot referral centre.

### 5. Cooperation with CISTI

The tape services provided by CISTI (CAN-SDI and CAN-OLE) can be useful in obtaining information on inquiries that require some sort of literature search. The vast majority of inquiries will not warrant using this service, but the Technical Information Unit, in cooperation with DBR Library staff, should have personnel trained in its use.

### 6. Cooperation with Other Agencies

The recent proliferation of various computer-based, information retrieval systems is changing the whole information picture. Some of these may be useful in answering specific requests for information. Some examples are: WATDOC (a system operated by the Department of the Environment); CCIC (Canadian Construction Information Corporation, BEAM Program); Transportation Research Board (U.S.), automated information storage and retrieval system.

Although these sources will not be of much value for responding to the majority of the letter inquiries received by DBR, we should be aware of these services and to be able to use them, if necessary.

## 7. Future (Longer-Term)

In the immediate future, with the present small staff, inquiries will have to be handled in generally the same manner as in the past. Our main sources of information for answering inquiries will continue to be our own library and publications, and the expertise of our research staff. If an inquiry cannot be answered from these sources, the best we can do is refer the inquirer to the appropriate agency. This procedure of offering a specialized technical service may remain the same for many years depending on the future policy of the Division. If DBR decided to adopt an aggressive policy and to solicit inquiries so as to better serve the construction industry, the potential growth in the number of inquiries is indeed great.

The growth of the British Building Research Advisory Service is an example of what can happen if a system of soliciting inquiries is adopted. The growth in written inquiries as a result of their aggressive policy is given below:

<u>Year</u>	Number of Written Inquiries <sup>(1)</sup>
	<u>British Building Research Station</u>
1926	120
1931	1000
1965	7000 (with 10,000 telephone inquiries)
1973	*9000 (with 24,000 telephone inquiries and 400 detailed investigations)

It can be argued that it would be foolish for the Division to ever offer more than a rather specialized technical service. There is a real danger that too big an organization, too much data, too much reliance on computer-based services, too much communication may create a "monster" and even lead to less effective service. For technical questions, there is no substitute for informed research officers giving advice and "essential" references for specific problems. The service that DBR now offers is probably all that can be handled reasonably well with available staff.

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(1) Lea, F.M.; Science and Building, Department of Environment.  
H.M. Stat. Office, London, 1971.

\* 1973 Annual Report, British Building Research Station.

### SUMMARY

The total number of written inquiries received at DBR has remained fairly constant over the past twenty years; Canadian inquiries fluctuate between 600 and 800 per year, with inquiries from outside Canada varying from 10 to 15 per cent of the total inquiries received.

The distribution of inquiries received from various regions is quite representative of population. For the period 1965-73, the percentage of total Canadian inquiries from different regions compared with per cent of total population is shown as follows:

Region	Per Cent of Total Population	Per Cent of Canadian Inquiries (1965-1973)
Ontario	37	42.5
Quebec	28	22.8
Prairie Provinces	16	17.6
British Columbia	9	7.7
Atlantic Provinces	9	8.4
N.W.T. and Yukon	<1	.7

In the past ten years there has been:

- (1) A decrease in more technical inquiries from consultants and builders.
- (2) An increase in the more general inquiries from individuals.
- (3) An increase in geotechnical inquiries and inquiries on current topics, such as, solar heating of buildings, energy conservation, which have been given publicity in the media.

It is proposed to improve the handling and monitoring of future written inquiries by:

- (1) Upgrading the system of keeping statistics on future inquiries.

- (2) Devising a series of standard 1- to 2- page replies to inquiries on subjects that recur.
- (3) Keeping a catalogue of "selected" inquiries that are likely to be of future value.
- (4) Improving our liaison with CISTI and other agencies that provide computer-based information retrieval systems.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Anyone reviewing the inquiries handled by the Division cannot help but be impressed with the quality and the amount of technical information that has been sent out over the past 28 years to all parts of Canada. The individuals who have carried this major responsibility have made a major contribution to the success and reputation of the Division and, it is hoped, have helped the many inquirers who have come to the Division for technical information.



NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL OF CANADA  
DIVISION OF BUILDING RESEARCH

Date of Issue: 22-5-73

BUILDING RESEARCH OPERATING POLICIES

NUMBER 7

TECHNICAL INQUIRIES

Technical inquiries are received by DBR at the rate of about 1000\* per month. These requests for information are welcomed by the Division not only because they provide direct links with the construction industry and the public, but also because they provide a means of assessing the need for new publications and research. The answering of these inquiries and the preparation of new publications where the need is indicated is the responsibility of all sections.

The subject area of building is very broad involving many interrelationships and overlapping of disciplines. The sections established in DBR represent most disciplines and subject areas associated with building. Each section in its field of endeavour represents the best potential source of information since it already has an awareness of the state of the art and sources of information in its particular field in addition to the expertise of the individual research officers.

In fulfilling this important function of the Division, the following procedures have been established for dealing with inquiries:

- 1) All inquiries that relate to the N.B.C. or N.F.C. or acceptability of materials and components under C.M.H.C. should be passed to the Codes and Standards Group for processing.
- 2) All other inquiries requiring written answers by DBR will be assigned an inquiry number which can be obtained from the secretary in the Building Practice Group. (Project and/or other file numbers may be added if copies of the correspondence are required on other files.)

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\* This general estimate is higher than totals shown in Table I. It may have included some inquiries handled by the Library and Publication sections which were not included in analysis.

- a) Inquiries addressed to individual research officers will normally be answered by the research officer concerned or by colleagues in his section who have knowledge in the subject area. If it is considered by the section head that the inquiry is outside the subject area of the section the inquiry should be passed to the most appropriate section in DBR.
- b) Inquiries not addressed to a staff member are automatically passed to Building Practice. If it is within the field of responsibility of DBR it is given an inquiry number and assigned to the appropriate section in Building Practice or elsewhere for reply.

The basis on which inquiries are assigned is as follows:

- 1) If the inquiry can be fully answered by Divisional publications, it will be dealt with by the Publications Section.
- 2) If the inquiry is directly related to work that is being or has been carried out by the Division but cannot be answered in full by DBR publications the appropriate section is expected to provide information to supplement the publications that are available. If no DBR publications are available then the section should provide information or references to information sources that will answer the inquiry.
- 3) If the inquiry is on a subject related to building but outside the areas of specialization existent in the Division, it is forwarded to the section which is best able to represent the broader subject area. The section is requested to:

Answer the inquiry from a general knowledge of the problem

or

Provide the inquirer with references to published material on the subject

or

Refer the inquirer to other organizations that can assist the inquirer.

If an inquiry cannot be answered by existing publications the need for a new publication or publications should be assessed by the section head.

A copy of a reply should be sent to the appropriate regional office if the inquiry originates within the areas served by the regional stations.

Answers to all technical inquiries are filed in Building Practice and listed in a record book in chronological sequence. Inquiry answers including those from Regional Stations are scanned prior to filing to select those containing significant non-published information; analysis and bibliographical references. Summary cards are prepared on these selected inquiries and filed by subject with established abstract cards (under UDC) in the abstract card file for future reference and retrospective searches.

DIVISION OF BUILDING RESEARCH

STATISTICAL SUMMARY - TECHNICAL INQUIRIES

SECTION	Month							TOTALS
	Architects Engineers Scientists	Contractors Builders Bldg. Supts.	Suppliers Corporations (Materials Equipment)	Govt. Fed. Prov. Mun.	Educational Research Institutions (General)	Institutions Hospitals Ins. Co. Newspapers	Individuals (Mostly home-owners)	
Tech. Inf.								
Design & Use								
Services								
Geotech.								
Materials								
Noise & Vibrations								
Structures								
Fire								
Codes & Standards								
Inst. Unit								
Director's Office								
Regional Stations								

GEOGRAPHICAL REGION								TOTALS
B. C.								
Prairie								
Ontario								
Quebec								
Maritimes								
Foreign								

SURVEY ON INQUIRIES

During 1971 a survey was carried out to ascertain the number and nature of inquiries answered by scientific and technical staff of the Division of Building Research. Information was recorded, in Ottawa and in the four regional offices - Halifax, Saskatoon, Toronto and Vancouver, during the months of February, June and October. These months were chosen as being representative to some extent of construction "seasons". A summary of the results of the survey is set out below.

Total number of inquiries answered during the month of -

February . . . . .	1075
June . . . . .	921
October . . . . .	<u>855</u>

Total for 3 months . . . 2851

From the above, projected total for 12-month period . . . . 11,404 - average  
number of  
inquiries  
answered  
per year.

Nature of Inquiry -

Technical (specific subject) . . .	63%
National Building Code . . . . .	19%
General Building Research . . . . .	18%

Category of Inquirer -

Private individuals . . . . .	25%
Government Agencies (Federal, Provincial, Municipal) . . . . .	21%
Manufacturers'/Suppliers' representative . . . . .	15%
Consulting Engineer . . . . .	11%
Architect/Designer . . . . .	9%
Research Agencies, including University Science . . . . .	7%
Contractors' representative . . .	5%
General business representative . .	3%
Others (school teachers, etc) . .	4%

\*\*\*\*\*

17 November 1971.

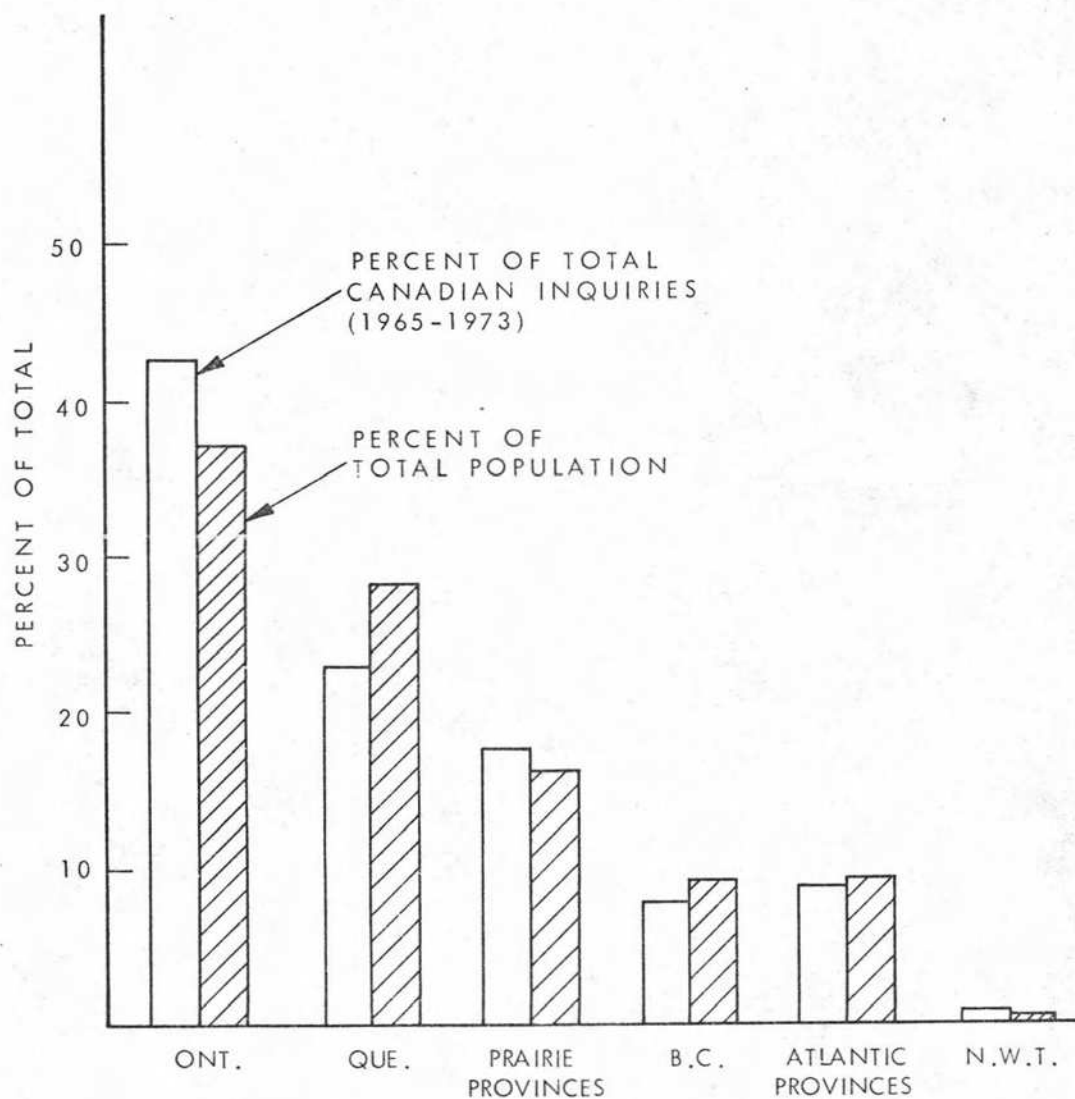


FIGURE 1

COMPARISON OF PERCENT OF INQUIRIES RECEIVED FROM REGIONS AND PERCENT POPULATION (1965-1973)



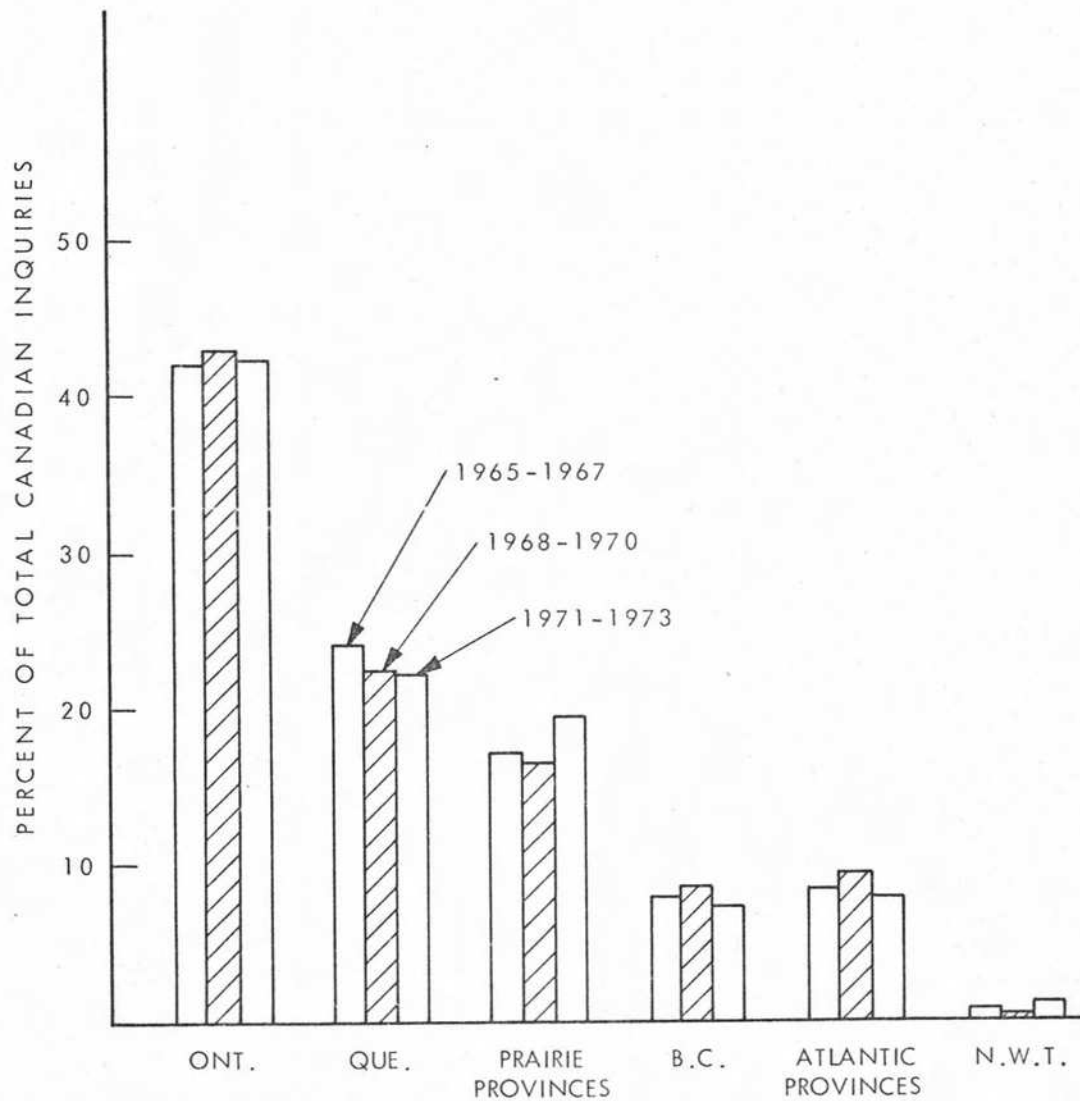


FIGURE 2

TRENDS IN INQUIRIES RECEIVED DURING A 9-YEAR PERIOD  
(1965-1973) FROM DIFFERENT REGIONS IN CANADA

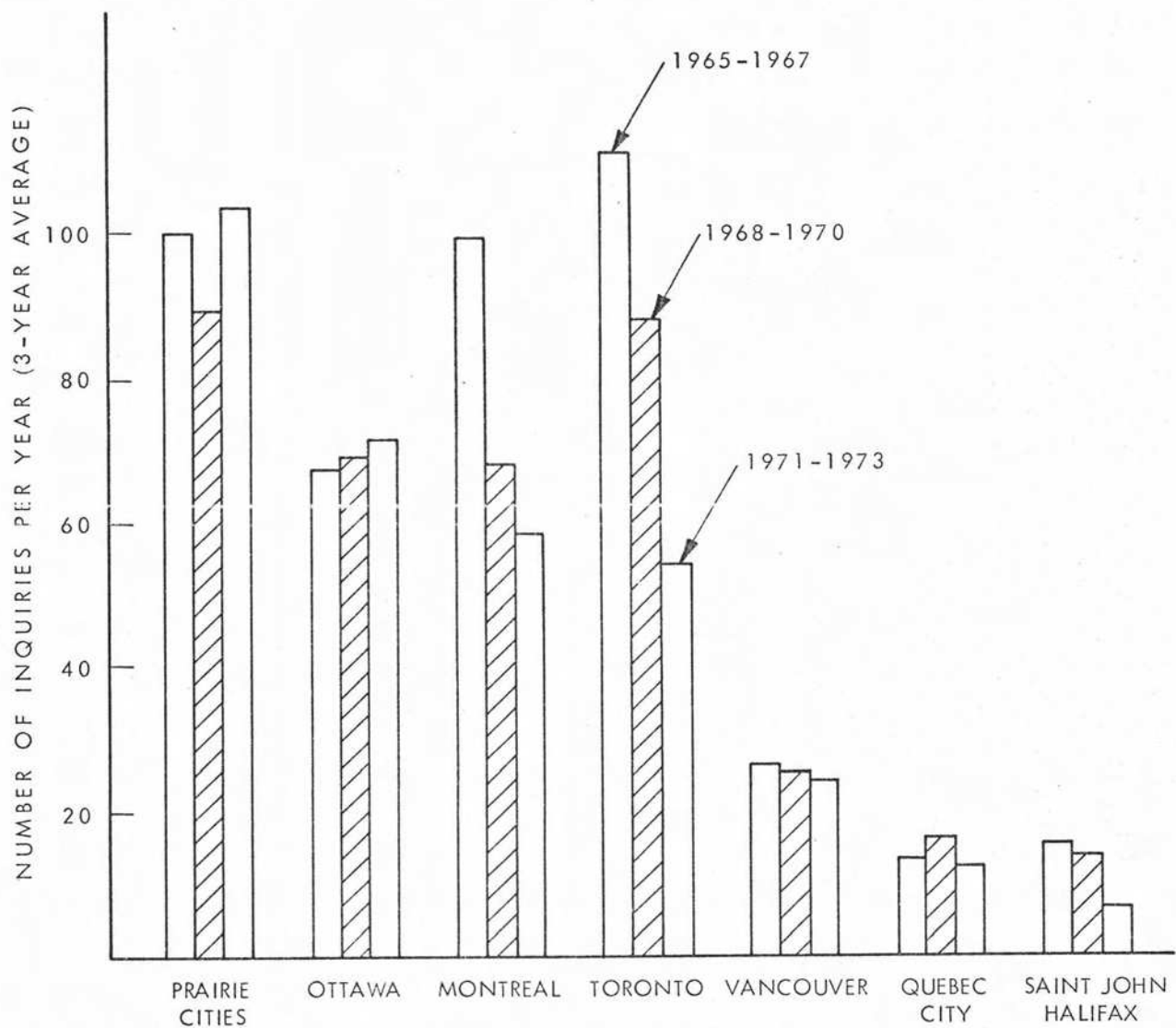


FIGURE 3

TRENDS IN INQUIRIES DURING A 9-YEAR PERIOD (1965-1973) FROM METROPOLITAN CENTRES

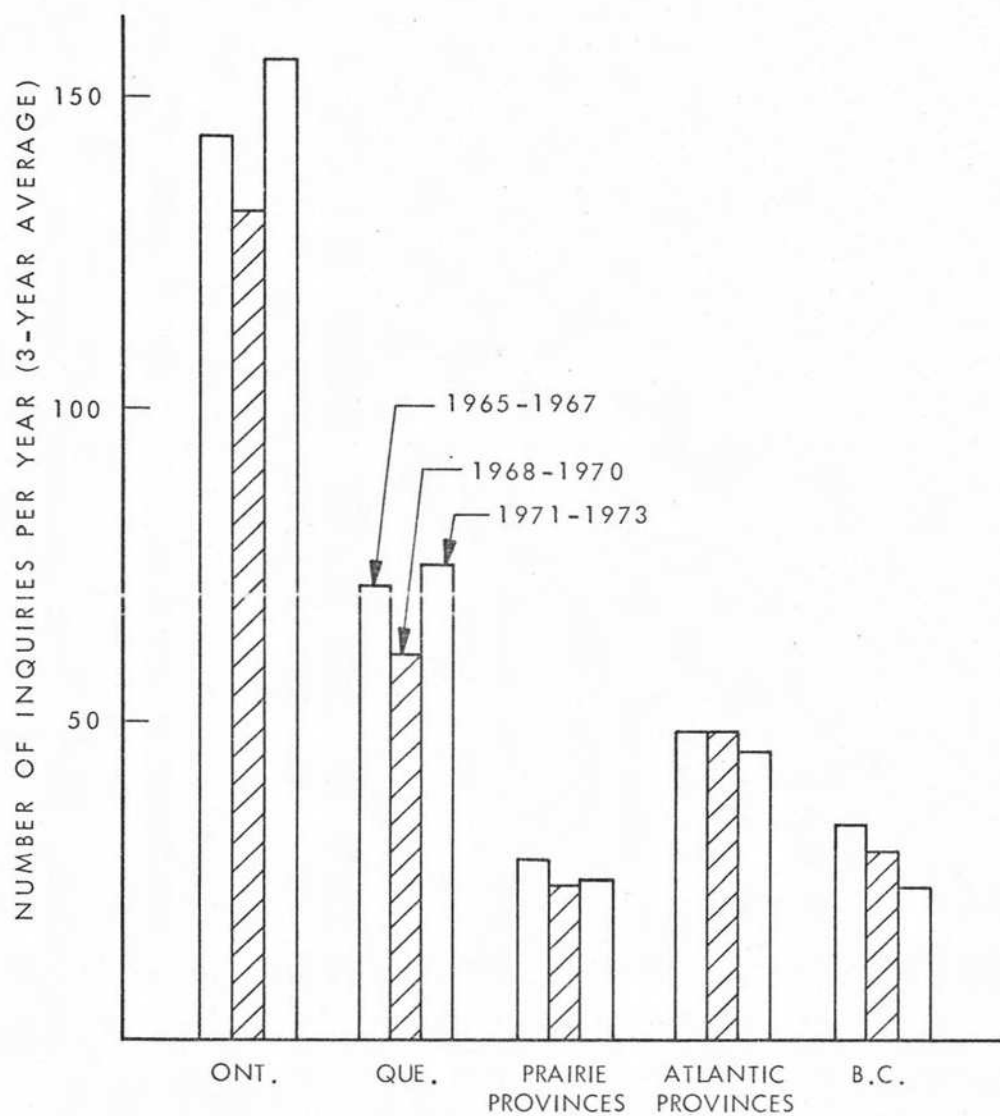


FIGURE 4

TRENDS IN INQUIRIES DURING A 9-YEAR PERIOD (1965-1973) FROM REGIONS, EXCLUDING MAJOR METROPOLITAN CENTRES (Shown on Fig 3)

BR 5391-4

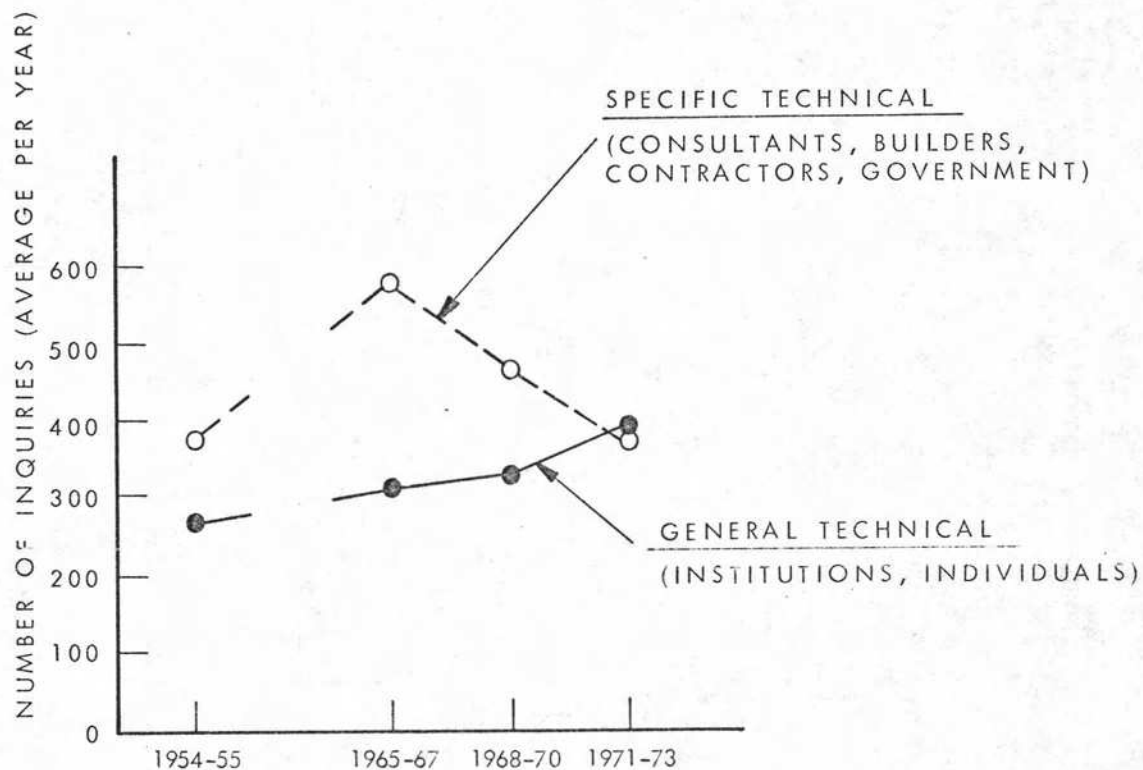


FIGURE 5

NUMBER OF INQUIRIES PER YEAR CLASSIFIED  
ACCORDING TO GENERAL CATEGORY