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Attitudes to the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) – Baseline Study

Executive Summary

Prepared for the Canadian Security Intelligence Service

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Canada

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This Public opinion research report presents the results of a telephone survey of 1,221 Canadians between 12-21 March 2018.

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français sous le titre : Attitudes du public à l'égard du Service canadien du renseignement de sécurité (SCRS)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background and Methodology

The Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) is Canada's national security intelligence service. CSIS investigates activities which may, on reasonable grounds, be suspected of posing a threat to the security of Canada. CSIS also has the authority to take measures to reduce these threats if there are reasonable grounds to believe that national security is at risk. Finally, it provides the Government of Canada with intelligence products that help inform decision-makers about Canada's security posture.

One of CSIS' organizational objectives is to strengthen the trust and confidence of its stakeholders through the delivery of valuable results, and continued lawfulness and privacy protection. As such, a first objective of this research study is to examine public views towards CSIS (including levels of trust in the organization) in order to shape communications strategies, and provide a baseline measurement to help measure their success. A second facet of this research study is to help shape recruitment strategies. This study is the first time CSIS has undertaken a public opinion research project and will serve as a baseline for future surveys.

The methodology for this study involved a bilingual, probability-based telephone survey of 1,221 Canadians. The sample frame consisted of, nationally, 587 landline respondents and 634 cell phone respondents.

Survey Findings

Outlined below are key findings from this study. The remainder of this report describes survey results in more detail.

Attitudes to Security and Privacy

The survey began with a series of broader questions related safety, security, and privacy in Canada. Respondents were asked about how safety in Canada has evolved over the past five years. Six in ten (59 per cent) feel that Canada is no more or less dangerous than it was five years ago. Among those who suggested a shift, the lean is towards a more dangerous outlook, with one-quarter (26 per cent) saying that Canada has become more dangerous. Just twelve per cent believe that Canada has become a safer place over the past five years. Tracking since 2007 reveals a seven-point decrease in the proportion of Canadians who believe that their country has become more dangerous, and a corresponding six-point increase in the percentage who say that there has been no change.¹

¹ Please note that all tracking is from EKOS' Security Monitor syndicated study, or internal surveys conducted by EKOS.

Results reveal moderate public trust in intelligence agencies, but also highlight the public's concerns when it comes to the amount of private information that these organizations hold. More than half of Canadians agree that the federal government can be trusted to strike the right balance between security and civil liberties (57 per cent, compared to 24 per cent who disagree), and that Canadian intelligence agencies act within the law when collecting information about Canadians (54 per cent versus 17 per cent).

Four in ten (41 per cent), however, expressed concerns about the information that intelligence agencies collect on them; and the plurality of Canadians (44 per cent) disagree with the idea that police and intelligence agencies should be given additional powers to ensure security if it means curtailing personal privacy safeguards.

Tracking reveals that the proportion of Canadians who say they trust the federal government to strike a balance between security and civil liberties is up 13 points since 2007. Support for providing additional powers to police and intelligence agencies is up nine points since 2015, although this figure remains well below the average for the ten years following the September 11th attacks.

Familiarity with CSIS

The survey then narrowed its focus to awareness and attitudes toward CSIS. Results suggest relatively limited top-of-mind awareness of CSIS. Respondents were asked, unaided, if they could name the organization that is responsible for investigating threats to Canada. Just three in ten (30 per cent) were able to identify the organization as CSIS, and roughly six in ten (63 per cent) were unsure.

Respondents were then given a brief description of CSIS and asked whether they had heard of the organization. While top-of-mind awareness of CSIS is quite low, results suggest that most Canadians are aware of the organization, even if they cannot identify it by name. Six in ten (59 per cent) say they have heard something about CSIS, while an additional seven per cent believe they 'may' have heard something. One-third (33 per cent) do not recall seeing or hearing anything about the organization.

Attitudes to CSIS

Results reveal that although awareness of the organization may be fairly low, Canadians place a great deal of importance on CSIS' role in protecting Canada against terrorism and espionage threats. Seven in ten (69 per cent) rate CSIS' mission as very important, while a further one in four (26 per cent) say it is somewhat important. Virtually no respondents (one per cent) believe that the responsibilities borne by CSIS are of little to no importance.

Results also reveal broad public confidence in CSIS. More than eight in ten Canadians (84 per cent) indicate at least some confidence in the organization, although the bulk of these individuals (64 per cent) expressed only 'some' confidence.

Echoing these findings, survey results reveal wide-ranging trust in CSIS. Eight in ten (80 per cent) place at least some trust in CSIS' ability to safeguard Canadians' rights and freedoms, although most (65 per cent) say they 'somewhat' trust the organization.

Respondents were presented with a list of three examples of how CSIS has protected Canadians from terrorism and espionage and asked how each one would impact their support for CSIS' activities. All three examples increased support for CSIS: more than eight in ten Canadians feel that they would be more likely to support CSIS upon learning that it has assisted in foiling acts of terrorism within Canada (86 per cent), that it has prevented suspected terrorists from immigrating to Canada (85 per cent), or that it has caught foreign spies attempting to steal classified information (84 per cent).

Despite high levels of trust in CSIS (and reflecting privacy concerns discussed earlier in the report), Canadians strongly prefer that CSIS err on the side of transparency rather than secrecy in its operations. Fully two-thirds (68 per cent) believe that, while some level of secrecy may be necessary, Canadians ought to know more about the information that CSIS collects. Only three in ten (29 per cent) feel the benefits of secrecy outweigh the risks.

Openness to Career with CSIS

Respondents who were not retired were asked how important each of a range of job-related aspects are to them. Results reveal that stability, potential income growth, benefits, and intellectual stimulation rank as the job characteristics that Canadians most value in a career. Two-thirds place a high degree of importance on job stability (67 per cent), good benefits such as a pension (66 per cent), and a good income that grows steadily over time (65 per cent), while six in ten (61 per cent) rate an intellectually challenging job as very important. Half (48 per cent) rated a job that serves an important public purpose as a very important factor, while four in ten (42 per cent) put a great deal of importance on a job that is very well paid. Prestige ranks as a comparatively lesser priority, with just 15 per cent rating this factor as highly important.

Among respondents who are not retired, four in ten (38 per cent) indicated that they would consider a career with CSIS, while six in ten (58 per cent) would not. Those who indicated they would not consider a career with CSIS were asked, unprompted, to explain why they would not be interested in working for the organization. Responses generally centred around three themes: satisfaction with one's current career path, concerns about suitability, and an aversion to relocating. One-quarter (26 per cent) indicated that they already settled in a career path and, similarly, 15 per cent say they are not planning on changing careers at this stage in their lives. One in six are concerned that the job requirements would not be suited to their strengths (14 per cent) or indicated that they did not want to move to Ottawa (12 per cent). Seven per cent do not feel qualified to work at CSIS, and five per cent do not want to relocate.