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Qualitative and Quantitative Research on National Quality of Life Framework Executive Summary

Prepared for the Department of Finance Canada

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Ce résumé analytique est aussi disponible en français.

Canada 

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August 2020

This executive summary presents the results of focus groups and online survey conducted by Earnscliffe Strategy Group on behalf of the Department of Finance Canada. The qualitative research was conducted in July of 2020; the quantitative research was conducted in August of 2020.

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français sous le titre : Recherche qualitative et quantitative sur cadre national pour la qualité de vie.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Earnscliffe Strategy Group (Earnscliffe) is pleased to present this executive summary to Finance Canada summarizing the results of the qualitative and quantitative research conducted to inform the development of communications messages, products and dissemination tactics to assist in the development of a Government of Canada Quality of Life Framework.

The limitations of using Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and standard economic assessment tools to measure citizens' quality of life or their nation's overall economic well-being have been recognized internationally. These measures are limited in terms of helping establish policy priorities. Around half of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) members have adopted sets of indicators to measure well-being and help establish priorities in an effort to take a broader, more inclusive view of what it means to have a prosperous society. Coupled with GDP, these indicators complement economic growth measures, such as GDP, to provide a comprehensive picture of a country's economic performance and progress. This research aimed to help Finance Canada more comprehensively capture individual and nation-wide well-being, and to shed light on Canadians' expectations for incorporating these considerations into government decision-making processes. The research findings will be used to inform development of a more holistic quality of life framework that paints a broader picture of Canada's performance and its citizens' well-being, as well as provide insight into the alignment of these well-being factors with existing policy commitments.

The objectives of the research were to inform the development of communications messages, products and dissemination tactics to assist with the development of a Government of Canada Quality of Life Framework. Additionally, to ensure the Department of Finance's communications to Canadians are in step with the current sentiment, timely and easily understood. The contract value for this project was \$82,422.54 including HST.

To meet these objectives, Earnscliffe conducted a comprehensive two-phased approach of qualitative and quantitative research. The research began with a wave of qualitative research involving a series of three (3) online focus groups conducted on July 22, 2020. The groups were conducted with residents of four (4) Canadian regions: Montreal, Toronto, Calgary and Northern Canada. The groups were approximately 2 hours in length and conducted with residents over the age of 18. The group with residents of Calgary included two (2) participants from the Northwest Territories. The group with residents of Montreal was conducted in French; the others were conducted in English.

It is important to note that qualitative research is a form of scientific, social, policy, and public opinion research. Focus group research is not designed to help a group reach a consensus or to make decisions, but rather to elicit the full range of ideas, attitudes, experiences, and opinions of a selected sample of participants on a defined topic. Because of the small numbers involved, the participants cannot be expected to be thoroughly representative in a statistical sense of the larger population from which they are drawn and findings cannot reliably be generalized beyond their number.

The second wave of research was a quantitative online survey of 2,001 Canadians aged 18 and older. The online survey was conducted using our data collection partner, Leger’s, proprietary online panel. The survey was conducted from August 4th-9th, 2020 in English and in French, and was an average of 15 minutes long. The data was weighted to reflect the demographic composition of the Canadian population aged 18 and older. Because the online sample is based on those who initially self-selected for participation in the panel, no estimates of sampling error can be calculated, and the results cannot be described as statistically projectable to the target population. The treatment here of the non-probability sample is aligned with the Standards for the Conduct of Government of Canada Public Opinion Research for online surveys.

The key findings from the research are presented below.

Qualitative Research

- There is no denying that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on participants in all facets of their lives; and, most held mixed feelings as they reflected on their lives during quarantine. Some spoke of ‘surviving’ and the perception that life had been ‘put on pause’, while others spoke of feelings of anxiety and uncertainty as to what the future holds.
- Many participants explained that the pandemic has afforded them the opportunity to reflect on their values and priorities. Many felt that they had experienced a sort of ‘shift in values’ with more appreciation and gratitude for what they have rather than what they do not have.
- When asked how COVID-19 had impacted their finances, some spoke of the positive impact the pandemic has had on their pocketbooks (i.e., savings from cancelled vacations; not having to pay for gasoline or public transit; childcare; meals out at restaurants; etc.); while, others spoke of decidedly negative impacts including having lost their jobs or had their work hours reduced.
- There did not seem to be a universally held definition of quality of life. For some it referred to the basic necessities of life, whereas, for others, it encapsulated a variety of factors, beyond just economics such as good health, comfort, freedom, happiness/content, less stress, and balance.
- Most were generally satisfied with their quality of life although there was recognition that there is always room for improvement.
- In terms of expectations of the federal government, most felt that the ultimate goal should be to realize success for Canadians on a number of levels: ensuring Canadians have access to health care and shorter wait times; creating jobs; protecting the environment; keeping Canadians safe; ensuring equality (by elevating the most vulnerable); and, ensuring everyone has a livable wage. However, many had low expectations of the federal government in this regard.
- When asked, the overwhelming majority of participants felt that augmenting economic indicators by also monitoring factors such as those included in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) framework was widely considered likely to improve government direction, decision-making and desirable outcomes. The more that the measures being considered are already proven and recognized or validated by respected, neutral, third parties as credible and reliably accurate, the better – particularly for elements that are more subjective. Most felt that the federal

government needs to be examining something that can be both insightful and standardized, so they can measure progress being made over the long-term.

Quantitative Research

- Far outstripping all other responses, half of respondents (46%) name COVID-19 as the most important issue facing Canada today. At 15%, the economy is a distant second.
- Within that context, we find that 62% feel satisfied with their life right now and roughly the same proportion (66%) agree that if facing serious trouble in their life, they are confident they would have the support from friends, family and community to get through it.
- Opinion is divided over whether Canada's best years are ahead (32%) or behind us (37%).
 - Respondents are similarly divided between feeling they will be better off in 3-5 years (32%) and feeling they will be worse off (29%).
- Ranking the personal importance of 13 aspects of quality of life, physical health (56%), financial security (42%), and mental health (38%) are most often among the top three.
 - Least likely to be ranked among the top three were equal opportunity (7%), a sense of identity and belonging (6%), and access to good education/opportunities to upgrade your skills (6%).
- In each of nine categories, the following criteria are most often identified as important to respondents in terms of their quality of life:
 - Health: having access to quality health care services (43%) and living a life free of pain and/or illness (40%).
 - Financial Security: affordable food prices (52%), adequate retirement savings and/or pension plans (46%) and wages adjusted to cost of living increases (42%).
 - Personal Safety and Security: feeling physically safe in my community (45%) and knowing that I can get help if I am ever in trouble (44%).
 - Environment: access to clean drinking water (56%), access to running water and electricity (45%) and clean air (45%).
 - Work and Work/Life Balance: employment benefits (47%) and time with family and friends (39%).
 - Democracy and Trust in Public Institutions: knowing governments are working together in my best interests (62%) and being able to trust elected officials (59%).
 - Improving Access to Employment Opportunities: having equal opportunities for promotion in the workplace (40%) and eliminating the gender wage gap (37%).
 - Education and Skills Development: access to affordable post-secondary education (45%) and accessible and affordable internet (36%).
 - Personal and Cultural Identity: creating and maintaining social connections and personal relationships (47%) and being free of discrimination (45%).

- Asked to role play as Prime Minister and identify their top three priorities for making life better for the average Canadian, respondents demonstrate having a multitude of considerations, including several tied in terms of the number of mentions.
 - Improving the health care system (22%) tops the list, followed by protecting the environment (17%), lowering taxes and affordable housing at 15%, more job opportunities/employment (14%) and the improving the economy (13%).
- One in two Canadians (53%) feel that stronger growth in Canada’s GDP is important to their day-to-day life.
- However, far more (82%) feel that measures beyond economic growth such as health and safety, access to education, access to clean water, time for extracurricular and leisure activities, life satisfaction, social connections, and equality of access to public services are important to their day-to-day life.
- In fact, nearly three quarters (71%) of respondents feel it is important that the government move past solely considering traditional economic measurements like levels of economic growth, and also consider other factors like health, safety, and the environment when it makes decisions.
- Rating each of ten possible titles for this sort of new measure, Quality of Life (71%), Well-Being (63%) and Comprehensive Living Standard (61%) were most often given high ratings; while, Holistic Growth (36%), Rethinking Growth (45%), and Inclusive Growth (47%) had modestly positive ratings.

Research Firm:

Earnscliffe Strategy Group Inc. (Earnscliffe)

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I hereby certify as a Representative of Earnscliffe Strategy Group that the final deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in the Communications Policy of the Government of Canada and Procedures for Planning and Contracting Public Opinion Research. Specifically, the deliverables do not include information on electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, standings with the electorate or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leaders.

Signed:



Date: August 20, 2020

Stephanie Constable
Principal, Earnscliffe