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Public perceptions of the health impacts of climate change in Canada 2022

Executive Summary

Prepared for Health Canada

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Canada

Public perceptions of the health impacts of climate change in Canada 2022 - Final report

Prepared for Health Canada by Environics Research

March 2022

This public opinion research report presents the results of a dual-mode telephone and online survey conducted by Environics Research from February 10 to March 13, 2022.

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Executive summary

Background and objectives

Health Canada identified the need for public opinion research to understand the current views of Canadians on climate change, including the risks and impacts they believe are associated with their health, and how best to adapt and be more resilient in the future.

The primary objective of this research was to determine whether, and to what extent, public understanding and perceptions of climate change have evolved over time, based on comparisons to research conducted in 2008 and 2017. Specific research objectives were to understand:

- The level of awareness of climate change and its health risks and impacts;
- Actions taken to adapt/be more resilient to the health risks or impacts of climate change;
- Trusted sources of media used and other means and opportunities for education and awareness raising; and,
- The public's views on role(s) of government and non-government organizations.

Methodology

To address the research objectives, a dual-mode telephone and online survey was conducted with a total of 1,905 Canadians (aged 18 and over) from February 10 – March 13, 2022.

- The telephone survey consisted of interviews with a representative sample of 1,520 Canadians (1,070 land line and 450 cell phone only households). The margin of error for the full sample of 1,520 is plus or minus 2.5 percentage points, 19 times in 20.
- The online survey was conducted with 385 Canadians surveyed via an online panel, to allow for comparisons across mode should Health Canada wish to move this study to a fully online methodology in the future. Because an online survey is not a random probability sample, a margin of sampling error cannot be reported.

The results described below are based on the telephone data only. Where possible, the results from the 2022 survey have been compared to the 2008 and 2017 Health Canada surveys about climate change and health.

Cost of research

The cost of this research was \$119,776.84 (HST included).

Key findings

Climate change (impact) perceptions and concerns

- Canadians are increasingly convinced about the phenomenon of climate change. More than eight in ten (85%) say climate change is definitely happening, and this belief has steadily increased over time (from 69% in 2008 and 79% in 2017).
- Canadians who believe in climate change (definitely or probably) express widespread concern about it (79% are at least somewhat worried), although their concerns focus mainly on environmental impacts,

as well as impacts on their future and on extreme weather events, rather than on health impacts. Nonetheless, awareness of the health impacts of climate change has improved, with three-quarters (75%) of climate change believers able to identify at least one health-related impact (up from 69% in 2017).

- Climate change is contributing to a range of environmental and other impacts that affect Canadians' health. Since 2017, public perceptions that climate change impacts are a major health risk have increased, most notably for forest fires (59%, up 12 percentage points) and forest fire smoke (56%, up 11), but also for extreme heat events (51%, up 8), flooding (48%, up 5) and food security (44%, up 8).
- Canadians who believe in climate change increasingly accept it is a health risk now (57%, up from 53% in 2017) rather than in the future (34%); very few (7%) deny a link to health. However, the public's sense of their own vulnerability has not changed substantially: similar to 2017, in 2022 more than half (58%) feel personally vulnerable (either definitely or likely), and four in ten (40%) say there is someone in their household who is especially vulnerable.
- There has been a substantial jump in the proportion of climate change believers who say they have taken steps to protect against the health impacts of climate change (from 38% in 2017 to 59% in 2022). However, many of their reported actions actually relate to mitigation efforts (i.e., reducing the impacts of climate change) rather than protective or adaptive measures. To date, seven percent of Canadians have sought medical attention because of a climate change event.

Extreme weather

- Public perceptions of the health risk posed by extreme weather have increased since 2017: half of Canadians (52%) believe extreme weather events present a major or moderate health risk to them and their family (up from 42% in 2017). There has also been a shift in the type of extreme weather events linked to health risks, with greater mentions of extreme heat events and forest fires (that took place in summer 2021), and fewer mentions of winter storms (that occurred prior to the 2017 survey).
- Despite increased awareness of the health risks of extreme weather events, the proportion of Canadians who regularly or occasionally change their daily routines in response to an extreme weather alert (52%) has not changed significantly since 2017. There has been a jump in the proportion who have specifically changed their plans in response to a heat warning (from 51% in 2017 to 59%), due mainly to increases in BC and the Prairies.
- As in 2017, most Canadians can identify at least one symptom of heat illness, particularly dizziness and excessive thirst. Understanding how to protect against heat illness also remains similar to 2017; staying indoors (53%) and drinking fluids (52%) remain the most widely mentioned preventive measures. Canadians remain most likely to consult the Internet, followed by their doctor, for information about heat illness.
- There is scientific evidence that the annual average temperature in Canada has been rising, and the survey results indicate a majority of Canadians (68%) believe temperatures are increasing at least a little in their own community.

Indoor temperatures

- Increasing temperatures due to climate change and extreme heat events can create difficulties in cooling indoor spaces, which can be harmful to health. One in five Canadians find it difficult to regulate

the indoor temperature in their main living space in the summer. This skews to residents of apartments and condominiums and those who rent their home, and accordingly, to younger Canadians (under 35 years of age) and those with lower household incomes who comprise a greater proportion of renters and apartment dwellers.

- Almost three-quarters (73%) of Canadians report having a working air conditioner, a substantial jump from 2008 (52%). Only one percent who have air conditioning say they do not use it.

Role of federal government

- The federal government receives modest ratings for protecting Canadians' health from climate change. One in ten (10%) feel the government is doing a good job (rating between 8-10 out of 10), while six in ten give moderate ratings and one-quarter give negative ones.
- Almost one in five (18%) Canadians report having visited Health Canada's website in the past year to learn how to protect themselves and their family from climate change; this is higher among BC residents (26%) who disproportionately experienced the impacts of climate change throughout 2021.

Political neutrality statement and contact information

I hereby certify as a Senior Officer of Environics Research that the 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 contain any reference to electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, standings with the electorate, or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leader.

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