



Office of the
Privacy Commissioner
of Canada

Commissariat
à la protection de
la vie privée du Canada

2020 Survey of Canadians on Privacy-Related Issues

Executive Summary

Prepared for the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada

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Canada 

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March 2021

This public opinion research report presents the results of a telephone survey conducted by Phoenix SPI on behalf of the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada. The research study was conducted with 1,502 Canadians aged 16 and older between November 21st and December 20th, 2020.

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Executive Summary

The Privacy Commissioner of Canada is an advocate for the privacy rights of Canadians, with the powers to investigate complaints and conduct audits under two federal laws; publish information about information-handling practices in the public and private sectors; and conduct research into privacy issues. Phoenix Strategic Perspectives Inc. (Phoenix SPI) was commissioned by the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada (OPC) to conduct a telephone survey of Canadians on privacy-related issues.

1. Background and Objectives

Mandated by Parliament to act as an ombudsman and guardian of privacy in Canada, the Privacy Commissioner, among other things, is responsible for enforcing the *Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act* (PIPEDA). The OPC's mandate to protect and promote privacy rights includes promoting awareness and understanding of privacy issues by the Canadian public. In support of this, the OPC, every two years, has conducted quantitative research with the general population to collect the information it needs to advance and report on its core responsibility of protecting privacy rights.

The purpose of this research is to better understand the extent to which Canadians are aware, understand, and perceive privacy-related issues. Specifically, the objective of the research is to explore Canadians' attitudes and opinions of privacy issues that fall under the OPC's four strategic privacy priorities: economics of personal information; government surveillance; reputation and privacy; and the body as information. In addition, this year, the OPC wanted the survey to address how, if at all, the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic has influenced Canadians' views and concerns over their privacy.

The research findings will be used to learn more about Canadians' concerns and attitudes toward privacy, their awareness of privacy institutions, and views on personal information management as a whole. This knowledge will inform and guide outreach efforts with Canadians. The results will also help the OPC report on results as required in its Departmental Results Framework (DRF), specifically on whether privacy rights are respected and obligations are met, and whether Canadians are empowered to exercise their privacy rights.

2. Methodology

A 14-minute random digit dialling (RDD) telephone survey was administered to 1,502 Canadian residents, 16 years of age or older between November 21st and December 20th, 2020. An overlapping dual-frame (landline and cell phone) sample was used to minimize coverage error. The results can be considered representative of the population of Canadians aged 16 and older. Based on a sample of this size, the overall results can be considered accurate within $\pm 2.5\%$, 19 times out of 20. The margin of error is greater for results pertaining to subgroups of the total sample. Data were weighted to reflect the population in terms of age, gender, and region. For a more complete description of the methodology, refer to the Appendix: 1. [Technical Specifications](#) of the Final Report.

3. Highlights

Many Canadians said they are knowledgeable about their privacy rights, in general and specifically when it comes to protecting these rights. Canadians continue to be concerned about protecting their personal privacy.

Nearly two-thirds of Canadians (64%) rated their knowledge of their privacy rights as good or very good. In addition, just over half (58%) said their knowledge of how to protect their privacy rights is good or very good. Canadians' knowledge of their privacy rights and how to protect them has not changed since 2018. While concern about the protection of their privacy remains high among Canadians, the intensity of this concern has declined slightly, from 37% extremely concerned in 2016 and 2018 to 32% in 2020. Underscoring concern, almost half of Canadians (47%) do not have enough information to know how new technologies might affect their personal privacy (a small majority of 52% do feel confident about their knowledge of the privacy implications of new technologies).

More than six in 10 Canadians are confident that government respects their privacy rights; fewer feel this way about businesses. When it comes to trust in specific types of businesses, banks rate the highest among Canadians.

More than six in 10 Canadians (63%; up from 55% in 2018) feel that the federal government, in general, respects their privacy rights. Fewer, but still a significant minority of 45%, believe that businesses respect their privacy rights. Trust in businesses protecting privacy rights has increased seven percent since 2018, from 38% in 2018 to 45% this year. The vast majority of Canadians (81%) have at least a fair amount of trust that banks will protect the personal information they share with them. Following this, fewer have a fair amount or a great deal of trust in telecommunication and internet companies (47%), online retailers (40%) and Big Tech (39%). Canadians were least likely to trust social media companies to protect their personal information – 2% have a great deal and 15% a fair amount of trust in these companies.

Canadians are concerned about how their online personal information will be used by organizations.

More than eight in 10 Canadians (86%; up from 76% in 2018) are concerned about people using information available about them online to attempt to steal their identity, including almost half (48%) who said they are extremely concerned about identity theft. Nearly three-quarters of Canadians are concerned about social media platforms gathering personal information that they (73%) or someone else (74%) posted online to create a detailed profile of their interests and personal traits. In addition, 68% of Canadians are concerned about how companies and organizations might use information available about them online to make decisions about them, such as for a job, an insurance claim or health coverage.

Canadians are reluctant to share personal information about their body, except when talking to a healthcare provider by phone or online.

Six in 10 Canadians (60%) said they are comfortable sharing personal information about their body while talking to a healthcare practitioner by phone or online, but far fewer are comfortable sharing this same information in various other scenarios. In fact, majorities of Canadians indicated they would be uncomfortable providing a DNA sample to a company that might share it with police

(60%), providing a DNA sample to a company for genetic testing (55%), and allowing their fitness tracker data to be shared with employer / insurance companies (66%).

Many Canadians have refused to provide personal information due to privacy concerns and adjusted privacy settings on a social media account. Fewer have taken other actions to protect their privacy and some have even traded their personal information for discounts or incentives on goods or services.

Seven in 10 Canadians (71%; down from 76% in 2018) have refused to provide an organization or business with their personal information due to privacy concerns. Slightly more (74%) have adjusted privacy settings on a social media account. Far fewer have deleted a social media account due to privacy concerns (41%) or stopped doing business with a company that experienced a privacy breach (40%). In recognition of the value of their personal information to companies, more than one-third of Canadians (38%; up from 30% in 2018) have provided their personal information for discounts or incentives on a good or service.

Canadians' views on the Government of Canada collecting and using citizens' personal information are divided.

One-third of Canadians (32%) support the Government of Canada having powers to collect and use personal information as part of intelligence-gathering activities. Support declines seven percent when respondents were asked if the Government of Canada should have such powers, *even if it means Canadians have to give up some personal privacy.*

Outside of intelligence gathering, there is no strong consensus on what Canadians would feel comfortable with when it comes to the Government of Canada collecting personal information about citizens: 41% would be comfortable with the government collecting information from financial institutions to make economic decisions, 45% would be comfortable with the government collecting information from online sources to make decisions about access to government programs and services, and 57% would be comfortable with the government collecting information from online sources to investigate potential fraud.

Canadians are more likely to feel uninformed about how their personal information is handled by businesses and government, and many feel they have little control over how their information is used.

While 46% of Canadians feel informed about how their personal information is handled by *companies*, slightly more than half (54%) have not very much or no information at all about this. Similarly, 43% of Canadians feel informed about how *government* handles their personal information and 55% feel they are not well informed about this. The majority of Canadians also feel they have not very much or no control at all over how their personal information is used by companies (61%) or by government (65%).

4. Notes to Reader

- All results in the report are expressed as a percentage, unless otherwise noted.
- Throughout the report, percentages may not always add to 100 due to rounding and/or multiple responses being offered by respondents.

- The number of respondents changes throughout the report because questions were asked of sub-samples of survey respondents. Readers should be aware of this and exercise caution when interpreting results based on smaller numbers of respondents.
- Only subgroup differences that are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level and pertain to a subgroup of at least n=20 are described in the report. The exception regarding sample size are differences indicative of a pattern.
 - For the regional results, surveys completed by respondents from Nunavut or the Northwest Territories are grouped with the Prairies, and surveys completed by respondents from the Yukon are grouped with British Columbia.
- Reference is made to findings from similar surveys conducted in previous years. When comparing results over time, it should be kept in mind that the sample size and sample frame varies from wave to wave. Prior to 2012, approximately 2,000 Canadians were interviewed compared to approximately 1,500 starting in 2012. In addition, a dual sample frame (landline and cell phones) was introduced in 2012.
- The survey questionnaire is [appended](#) to the report.
- The tabulated data are available under separate cover.

5. Contract Value

The contract value was \$68,697.49 (HST included).

6. Statement of Political Neutrality

I hereby certify as a Senior Officer of Phoenix Strategic Perspectives 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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