



Government
of Canada

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du Canada

Continuous Qualitative Data Collection of Canadians' Views – February 2021

Executive Summary

Prepared for the Privy Council Office

Supplier name: The Strategic Counsel

Contract number: 35035-182346/001/CY

Contract value: \$1,618,838.00

Award date: December 18, 2020

Delivery date: April 13, 2021

Registration number: POR-005-19

For more information on this report, please email por-rop@pco-bcp.ca

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Canada 

Executive Summary

Introduction

The Communications and Consultation Secretariat of the Privy Council Office (PCO) commissioned The Strategic Counsel (TSC) to conduct continuous cycles of focus group research across the country with members of the public on key national issues, events, and policy initiatives related to the Government of Canada.

The broad purpose of this ongoing qualitative research program is three-fold: to explore the dimensions and drivers of public opinion on the most important issues facing the country; to assess perceptions and expectations of the federal government's actions and priorities, and; to inform the development of Government of Canada communications so that they continue to be aligned with the perspectives and information needs of Canadians, while remaining both clear and easy-to-understand.

The research is intended to be used by the Communications and Consultation Secretariat within PCO in order to fulfill its mandate of supporting the Prime Minister's Office in coordinating government communications. Specifically, the research will ensure that PCO has an ongoing understanding of Canadians' opinions on macro-level issues of interest to the government, as well as emerging trends.

This report includes findings from 12 online focus groups which were conducted between February 2nd and 25th, 2021, in multiple locations across the country including Atlantic Canada, Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia. Details concerning the locations, recruitment, and composition of the groups are shown in the section below.

The research for this cycle of focus groups focused primarily on COVID-19, as the pandemic continued in Canada. The research explored a wide range of related issues in depth, including what Canadians were hearing about the Government of Canada in the news, their outlook on COVID-19 and how that has influenced their behaviours, as well as their views on the federal government's performance throughout the pandemic. The research also explored the vaccine rollout in Canada, including whether or not Canadians were planning on getting a COVID-19 vaccine, the basis of any vaccine hesitation, thoughts on the federal government's procurement and distribution of the vaccine and perceptions on the proposed timeline for the rollout.

In addition, employment insurance (EI) and recovery benefits recipients were asked about the repayment of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) and young adults from the Hamilton-Niagara region were queried about the effectiveness of potential COVID Alert app QR code posters. There were also further discussions held among particular subgroups of the population – parents of school aged children in Saskatchewan's major centres and those experiencing COVID fatigue and showing riskier behaviors in major centres across B.C. – to undertake a 'success check' for a video advertisement regarding COVID-19.

In addition to the pandemic, non-COVID-19 related discussions broached other topics including the state of the French language, Indigenous issues, homelessness, online hate, childcare, public transit, toxins, environmental issues, firearms and mandatory minimum penalties.

As a note of caution when interpreting the results from this study, findings of qualitative research are directional in nature only and cannot be attributed quantitatively to the overall population under study with any degree of confidence.

Methodology

Overview of Groups

Target audience

- Canadian residents, 18 and older.
- Groups were split primarily by location.
- Some groups focused on specific subgroups of the population including parents with children in daycare or who were considering daycare within the next 12 months, parents with school aged children, those who were vaccine hesitant, EI/Recovery benefits recipients, Indigenous people, young adults (aged 18–30), and people who were experiencing COVID-19 fatigue and exhibiting riskier behaviours.

Detailed approach

- 12 focus groups across various regions in Canada.

- Three groups were conducted with the general population in smaller/rural centres in Ontario, the Greater Montreal Area (GMA) and major centres across Atlantic Canada.
- The other nine groups were conducted with key subgroups including:
 - Parents with children in daycare or who were considering daycare within the next 12 months residing in the Greater Vancouver Area (GVA);
 - Vaccine hesitant people residing in mid-size and major centres in Quebec and across the province of Alberta;
 - Indigenous people in Quebec;
 - EI/Recovery benefits recipients residing across the province of Manitoba;
 - Young adults (aged 18–30) residing in the Hamilton-Niagara region of Ontario;
 - Parents of school aged children (in Junior Kindergarten through to grade 12) residing in Saskatchewan’s major centres; and
 - Those experiencing COVID-19 fatigue and exhibiting riskier behaviours residing in major centres across B.C. and in Kitchener through to Southwest Ontario.
- Groups in Quebec, with the exception of the group with Indigenous people residing in Quebec, were conducted in French, while all others were conducted in English.
- All groups for this cycle were conducted online.
- A total of 8 participants were recruited for each group, assuming 6 to 8 participants would attend.
- Across all locations, 85 participants attended, in total. Details on attendance numbers by group can be found below.
- Each participant received an honorarium. The incentive ranged from \$100 to \$125 per participant, depending on the location and the composition of the group.

Group Locations and Composition

LOCATION	GROUP	LANGUAGE	DATE	TIME (EST)	GROUP COMPOSITION	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
Greater Vancouver Area (GVA)	1	English	Feb. 2	9:00-11:00 pm	Parents with children in daycare and/or considering daycare within next 12 months	8
Mid-size and Major Centres Quebec	2	French	Feb. 3	6:00-8:00 pm	Vaccine Hesitant	6
Alberta	3	English	Feb. 4	8:00-10:00 pm	Vaccine Hesitant	6
Manitoba	4	English	Feb. 9	7:00-9:00 pm	EI/Recovery benefits Recipients	7
Quebec	5	English	Feb. 10	6:00-8:00 pm	Indigenous People	6

Hamilton-Niagara Region Ontario	6	English	Feb. 11	6:00-8:00 pm	Young Adults (aged 18-30)	8
Smaller/Rural Centres Ontario	7	English	Feb. 16	6:00-8:00 pm	General Population	8
Saskatoon and Regina	8	English	Feb. 17	7:00-9:00 pm	Parents of School Age Children (JK-grade 12)	7
Major Centres B.C.	9	English	Feb. 18	9:00-11:00 pm	People experiencing COVID fatigue/Exhibiting riskier behaviours	7
Greater Montreal Area (GMA)	10	French	Feb. 22	6:00-8:00 pm	General Population	6
Kitchener through to SW Ontario	11	English	Feb. 23	6:00-8:00 pm	People experiencing COVID fatigue/Exhibiting riskier behaviours	8
Major Centres Atlantic Canada	12	English	Feb. 25	5:00-7:00 pm	General Population	8
Total number of participants						85

Key Findings

Part I: COVID-19 Related Findings

Government of Canada in the News (All Locations)

Participants in February continued to be attuned to news and information regarding the pandemic. When asked what they had seen, read or heard about the Government of Canada within the last few days, participants' top-of-mind recollections focused mainly on issues related to vaccine supply and distribution and recently announced travel restrictions.

On the topic of the vaccine roll-out, while some spoke in generally positive terms about the federal government's efforts to procure and distribute vaccines, commenting on imminent deliveries of large volumes of the vaccines, others expressed concerns about shortages and delays in vaccine distribution which left them feeling that Canada's roll-out was proceeding at a slower pace relative to other countries.

A few other issues surfaced at this point in the discussion, including: the departure of the Governor General, the controversy surrounding the WE Charity, concerns about indiscretions among the

leadership of National Defence, the development of the Keystone XL pipeline, financial aid to Canadian airlines, the 'assault-style' gun buyback program recently announced by the federal government, and a non-binding resolution condemning China's treatment of minority groups.

Based on comments offered by participants, many appeared fairly well-informed about recently announced travel regulations by the federal government which involved mandatory testing for COVID-19 and quarantining for travelers arriving in or returning to Canada. Moreover, most were in favour of the regulations and, in some cases, thought they did not go far enough. A few others, however, mostly those in the group held in Alberta, were more critical and specifically concerned about references to increased surveillance and enforcement for travelers who receive a negative test result and are then able to shift from quarantining at a designated government facility to their own home. They felt the federal government's approach was overly-aggressive and intrusive, infringing on individual's right to choose how and where they wish to quarantine.

Within the context of this discussion, a number of participants expressed concerns about the viability of the airline industry in Canada. Frustration was also expressed at news of politicians and others travelling internationally during the winter break even while Government of Canada and other public health experts recommended not to travel for other than essential purposes.

COVID-19 Outlook (GVA Parents with Children in Daycare or Considering Daycare, Mid-size and Major Centres Quebec Vaccine Hesitant, Alberta Vaccine Hesitant, Manitoba EI/Recovery Benefits Recipients, Quebec Indigenous Peoples, Hamilton-Niagara Region Ontario Young Adults, Smaller and Rural Centres Ontario, Major Centres Saskatchewan Parents of School Aged Children, Major Centres B.C. Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours, Kitchener to SW Ontario Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours)

In several groups throughout the month participants discussed the evolving situation with respect to COVID-19 and the impact of the pandemic on their lives.

Behaviours

When asked whether they had changed their behaviours in the last few weeks, most participants indicated they had not. Many were continuing to adhere to public health measures, following many of the stay-at-home advisories and remained cautious in their interactions with others who were outside of their household. During the winter months, participants had limited who they were seeing and were generally more restrictive overall, which they expressed was both a physical and mental hardship for them.

A few participants acknowledged some recent changes in their behaviours, including: sending their children back to school/activities, returning to their office/jobsite, changing their job or relocating for work and shopping more locally. Participants said they had been motivated to make these changes either out of necessity or due to a change in regional restrictions.

Impact of COVID-19

While many said they had adapted to their new routine, others found the COVID-19 related restrictions were certainly wearing on them. Several participants said their mental health and wellness had been negatively impacted, mostly due to being confined at home and a lack of social interaction. Some had also been impacted in terms of their employment - particularly those working in hard-hit industries where they had been laid off completely or had experienced a loss of work. In related discussions, several participants expressed the financial hardships and struggles they had experienced throughout the pandemic.

Asked how the situation compared to restrictions last spring, on balance, most participants were finding it harder. They explained that as more time passed, it became more difficult to hold on to hope that the COVID-19 situation would start to improve and that they were growing more frustrated and tired, especially with the winter weather and continued restrictions and closures. However, some participants commented that they were finding their situation with regards to the pandemic easier because they felt there was more information being provided about the virus (which had helped to reduce their anxiety and fear around contracting the virus) or that they felt that they had adjusted to their lifestyle now.

Parents living in the GVA (with children in daycare or considering daycare for their children) were asked how COVID-19 had impacted their children. Most felt that the pandemic had been difficult on their child/children, citing a unique set of challenges including: an inability for their young children to understand the complexities of the situation, the cancellation of typical activities (such as community activities, sports, etc.), worries about their children's screen time, concerns about the long-term effects on their social development and noticeable changes in their behaviours and mental health. Asked about the difficulties they personally faced as parents, participants discussed the challenges of not having their own time away from their children and the struggles to keep their children occupied/entertained when options for activities were limited.

Performance of the Government of Canada

Participants were asked to comment on the Government of Canada's performance during the pandemic. Many remarked that they believed the Government of Canada was doing the best they could in an unprecedented situation and credited them for trying to do what was best for Canadians. In particular, they felt the federal government had performed well in providing financial support, implementing travel restrictions, communicating with the public, securing a diverse supply of COVID-19 vaccines and providing support to Indigenous communities.

At the same time, some suggestions were made in terms of what they could do better, many of which focused on the topic of vaccines. Many commented that the Government of Canada should focus on trying to speed up the vaccination roll out across the country, as well as continuing to provide more information and transparency to Canadians as this happens. Some suggested a made-in-Canada vaccine would prove to be useful in this regard. Others sought more support for businesses and some commented about their need for further review on how financial supports are continuing to be distributed to individuals and families. Although many participants understood that specific public

health restrictions, such as re-openings and lockdowns, fell under the provincial government's purview, many expressed the desire to have a standardized set of national guidelines or framework.

Riskier Behaviours (Major Centres B.C. Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours, Kitchener to SW Ontario Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours)

In two groups, participants who were fatigued by COVID-19 and exhibiting riskier behaviours, were asked what had made them decide to have contact with individuals outside of their household. Those who had been visiting extended family needed to have family members help care for their children or themselves had to care for an elderly or sick loved one. Those who had been seeing friends reported doing so because they lived alone or were feeling isolated which was affecting their mental health. Participants did not seem to have many concerns about socializing with others as they generally felt they were being safe and limiting the number of people they were seeing overall.

Participants in these two groups did not have difficulties following many of the public health guidelines such as wearing masks or social distancing, but had found it difficult to limit their social interactions. Difficulties stemmed from not fully understanding restrictions, having a hard time keeping up with changing restrictions, feeling like the measures imposed were not effective or that they were not seeing any real consequences from others who were not following the rules. They were generally less concerned about the overall impacts of COVID-19 on themselves personally or for their families, with the exception of the struggles expressed regarding their own/their children's mental health. Overall, they were more concerned about the economic impact of the pandemic on businesses and communities.

To conclude the discussion, most felt that certain restrictions, such as mask wearing and social distancing, should remain in place. However, they would have liked to see some of the restrictions regarding social interactions lifted in B.C. and Ontario, especially in areas where case counts were lower. Other suggestions included reintroducing social bubbles and making restrictions equal across the board, including helping small businesses re-open. Only a few participants, who were concerned about new variants, suggested that the current social gathering restrictions should remain in place until such variants were properly controlled.

COVID-19 Vaccine (GVA Parents with Children in Daycare or Considering Daycare, Mid-size and Major Centres Quebec Vaccine Hesitant, Alberta Vaccine Hesitant, Manitoba EI/Recovery Benefits Recipients, Quebec Indigenous Peoples, Hamilton-Niagara Region Ontario Young Adults, Smaller and Rural Centres Ontario, Major Centres Saskatchewan Parents of School Aged Children, Major Centres B.C. Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours, Kitchener to SW Ontario Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours)

The COVID-19 vaccine was top-of-mind for many participants. Various aspects related to the roll-out of the vaccine, including participants' expectations with regards to the timelines, as well as the Government of Canada's performance in procuring and distributing a vaccine, and participants' interest in being vaccinated were discussed in several groups throughout February. Two groups were

specifically recruited on the basis of their views regarding the vaccine, having indicated that they were somewhat hesitant about being vaccinated.

While many could not accurately judge the federal government's performance in procuring and distributing the vaccine, most were of the view that they had done a good job especially given the very challenging circumstances. Participants commented favourably on how quickly vaccinations with frontline workers and elderly people were being rolled out. Some participants, however, were more critical of the Government of Canada's performance, believing that Canada had been late in procuring vaccines, attributing this primarily to early negotiations with a Chinese vaccine maker that subsequently fell through. Concerns were also expressed about Canada's lack of domestic capability to manufacture a vaccine.

Participants were told that Canada had received over one million doses to date and asked what they thought about this, in particular whether this was more, less or about what they thought was the case. Responses were quite mixed. Some were unaware of this milestone, although they felt it aligned with their expectations. Others questioned whether Canada was receiving fewer vaccines relative to other countries and worried that what they felt was a slower pace of delivery would make it challenging to vaccinate all eligible Canadians in a timely fashion. The concern was that vaccinations may carry over into 2022.

Judging the Effectiveness of the Vaccine Roll-out (Manitoba EI/Recovery Benefits Recipients, Quebec Indigenous Peoples, Hamilton-Niagara Region Ontario Young Adults, Smaller and Rural Centres Ontario, Major Centres Saskatchewan Parents of School Aged Children)

Participants in a select number of groups considered how and on what basis they would judge the effectiveness of Canada's vaccine roll-out. Although some participants found this question difficult to answer, the rate of vaccinations was put forward as a key indicator by several participants, specifically the timeline to achieve full vaccinations and the lag time between receipt of the first and second doses. Others noted that they would be assessing Canada's performance relative to other countries as well as against the schedule established by the Government of Canada. Still others were primarily focused on trend lines in terms of rates of infection, deaths and adverse events related to the vaccines. Finally, a few participants commented that the most important indicator would be economic recovery and the overall costs associated with the effort to address the pandemic, relative to the outcome and impact. While some participants focused on the process (e.g., whether the distribution had been undertaken in an organized manner), most were more concerned with the speed at which vaccines were rolled out.

Compared to Other Countries (GVA Parents with Children in Daycare or Considering Daycare, Mid-Size and Major Centres Quebec Vaccine Hesitant, Alberta Vaccine Hesitant, Manitoba EI/Recovery Benefits Recipients, Quebec Indigenous Peoples, Hamilton-Niagara Region Ontario Young Adults, Smaller and Rural Centres Ontario, Major Centres Saskatchewan Parents of School Aged Children)

When explicitly asked about how Canada was doing, as a whole, compared to other countries in getting Canadians vaccinated, the balance of participants either weren't sure or felt that Canada was

likely doing about the same. The remainder were about evenly split between those who thought Canada was doing better and those who thought it was doing worse. The mere fact that vaccines were arriving, vaccinations were underway, and that the Government of Canada was being proactive and transparent was viewed favourably. Others, who felt Canada was lagging behind other countries, were seeking more regular information and greater transparency on progress related to vaccinations and/or felt the process had rolled out more slowly than they had anticipated.

Vaccination Targets and Timing (GVA Parents with Children in Daycare or Considering Daycare, Mid-size and Major Centres Quebec Vaccine Hesitant, Alberta Vaccine Hesitant, Manitoba EI/Recovery Benefits Recipients, Quebec Indigenous Peoples, Hamilton-Niagara Region Ontario Young Adults, Smaller and Rural Centres Ontario, Major Centres Saskatchewan Parents of School Aged Children)

Participants were told that Canada planned to vaccinate three million Canadians by the end of March and everyone who wants a vaccine by the end of September. Most were aware of this target although many were uncertain as to whether this was a reasonable goal. Some felt that it was achievable given that a million doses had already been received and distributed. By contrast, those who questioned the attainability of this goal were concerned that it would be a challenge to inoculate three million people within a month's time, especially if the vaccines had not yet been delivered to Canada. Similarly, they calculated that it may be equally difficult to vaccinate all remaining eligible Canadians within a six-month timeframe, especially given the range of uncertainties (e.g. how many and which vaccines had been purchased, when they would be delivered, the durability/expiry dates for the vaccines, the recommended interval between doses, etc.) and the timelines for distribution.

Participants commented that their confidence in Canada's ability to meet these targets would be bolstered with additional regular updates on deliveries of vaccines, daily vaccination rates by target group, and vaccinations by phase (e.g., by eligibility to be vaccinated). Some also reiterated their interest in more information pertaining to vaccine effectiveness and adverse reactions.

From a personal perspective, participants' views on when they expected to be vaccinated varied widely. Estimates ranged from within a month's time to sometime during the spring or summer, into the fall and winter or as late as the following year (2022), although few expressed concerns at the possibility of having to wait several months or more.

Vaccine Intentions and Hesitancy (GVA Parents with Children in Daycare or Considering Daycare, Mid-size and Major Centres Quebec Vaccine Hesitant, Alberta Vaccine Hesitant, Manitoba EI/Recovery Benefits Recipients, Quebec Indigenous Peoples, Hamilton-Niagara Region Ontario Young Adults, Smaller and Rural Centres Ontario, Major Centres Saskatchewan Parents of School Aged Children, Major Centres B.C. Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours, Kitchener to SW Ontario Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours)

In all groups, with the exception of the two which comprised exclusively those recruited on the basis of their hesitancy towards vaccination, participants were asked outright if they planned to be vaccinated. Most responded affirmatively, although many expressed some uncertainty or preferred to wait. Fewer expressly stated that they did not intend to be vaccinated.

The motivations for those wishing to be vaccinated centered on a desire to return to normalcy, especially to see friends and family, as well as to keep themselves and their families well protected. Many also expressed confidence in the science behind the vaccines.

The issue of vaccine hesitancy was explored in more depth, particularly among those who had been explicitly recruited on this basis. These participants raised a number of concerns which factored into their reluctance to be vaccinated, including: side effects, medical conditions which they felt would make vaccinations inadvisable, general predisposition toward non-medical treatments and natural remedies, and concerns about the rapid pace at which these vaccines had been developed. Several also felt that their age and health status did not warrant consideration of vaccination at this time. A few also felt that the virus itself was not as serious as was being reported and believed they would be likely to exhibit mild symptoms and/or recover quickly if they contracted it. Participants were unlikely to be moved towards a more positive view of vaccinations in the near-term, although they were open to receiving more information about the virus and the vaccines. Some also indicated that they would be more inclined to get a vaccination if it was mandated as a requirement for travel or to be able to attend public events, for example.

The main questions this group had about vaccines focused on the safety of the vaccine, likely effects, including initial side effects as well as possible long-term issues, and the overall efficacy of the vaccines in reducing or stopping the spread of COVID-19.

COVID Alert App QR Code Poster Testing (Hamilton-Niagara Region Ontario Young Adults)

Participants were shown a series of three QR code poster concepts individually, which had been developed by the Government of Canada as a possible tool to assist in COVID-19 tracing in coordination with the COVID Alert app. The three poster concepts can be found in the Detailed Findings as well as the appendix. Prior to reviewing the posters, participants were first asked whether they were aware of the Government of Canada's COVID Alert app. About as many had heard about the app as had not.

On balance, participants reacted more favourably to the second poster concept, as many preferred the colour scheme and messaging of *'Help make contact tracing easier.'* Participants generally expressed that the colour scheme of the first and third concept were overly friendly, which for some suggested a certain degree of optionality versus urgency, as to whether the QR code should be scanned. Additionally, the messages contained in both the first and third concept did not resonate as highly with participants.

Participants were then shown the three concepts side-by-side and asked to evaluate aspects such as colour scheme, message, and positioning of the Government of Canada logo. Some participants who previously reacted negatively to the colour of the third poster, subsequently softened their criticism and stated that, relative to the other options, they found this colour to be more effective and attention-grabbing. Others maintained that they preferred the colour of the second poster. Overall, participants felt the message of *'Help make contact tracing easier'* was more effective as it was direct, to the point and plainly communicated the purpose of the poster. It was also thought that the more

inviting tone of this phrase would encourage people to actually scan the QR code. When asked about the positioning of the Government of Canada logo, many stated it was best positioned at the top of the poster. Participants indicated that this placement, in their minds, lent the posters a more official look, made the logo more noticeable and increased the overall impact of the poster.

To conclude the discussion on this topic, participants were asked whether they would make use of the QR code and poster and whether they felt this initiative would assist in curbing the spread of COVID-19. Among those who had already downloaded the COVID Alert app, a few stated that they would scan the QR code if it served a dual purpose – minimized their exposure and replaced any additional 'sign-in' forms required in order to enter that particular location. Participants who had not already downloaded the COVID Alert app remarked that the information shown in the posters did encourage them to download the app.

On balance, participants generally believed the initiative would help stop the spread of COVID-19, although some expressed skepticism, noting that success was ultimately contingent on the number of users of the app and the QR codes.

Ad Testing – Success Check (Major Centres Saskatchewan Parents of School Aged Children, Major Centres B.C. Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours)

Throughout the pandemic, the federal government has run various advertising campaigns to inform Canadians about COVID-19 and the public health measures which have been put in place to keep Canadians safe. Two versions of a video ad, which had been developed to promote continued compliance with these measures, were shown to participants in the two above noted groups. Both versions featured the same storyline and content but each had a different soundtrack, which was compared at the end of the discussion. The videos are included in the Detailed Findings and the Appendix.

After viewing the ad, participants were then asked for their reaction, specifically with respect to key messages and its perceived impact. Overall, participants in both groups reacted quite positively to the ad. They described the video as cute, amusing, and humorous. Comments from participants indicated that they liked the light-hearted nature of the ad and its friendly tone which left them feeling positive. They appreciated that it featured characters from a wide range of ages, genders and ethnicities, which they felt to be inclusive and relatable.

Participants felt the message was a good reminder to Canadians to continue playing their part in following public health guidelines (such as wearing a mask) to the fullest extent and not only partway. Overall most felt this ad would have an impact on behaviour among those who had already been mostly following COVID-19 public health measures and needed a reminder on the importance of continued diligence. However, many believed that it would have no impact on those who were not already following the guidelines.

Across both groups, participants generally enjoyed the music that accompanied the ad. For version 1, the music was described as comedic, dynamic and suspenseful in nature and participants liked the

humorous notes, which they suggested helped build up the storyline. Version 2 was described as catchy and upbeat.

Asked to select which of the two music tracks was more effective, the feedback differed based on which video the group listened to first. Participants from major centres in Saskatchewan felt the soundtrack in version 1 was more effective because of its suspenseful sound effects, which in turn would help keep viewers engaged. By contrast, those in B.C. suggested that the soundtrack in version 2 would be more effective because it matched the light-hearted tone of the ad. While views differed in terms of which would be more effective, participants generally held positive views for both audio tracks.

CERB Repayment (Manitoba EI/Recovery Benefits Recipients)

A discussion on pandemic-related financial supports was held with participants residing across the province of Manitoba who had received Employment Insurance (EI) or any one of the recovery benefits offered by the Government of Canada.

Financial Support

Participants were first asked how they thought the Government of Canada has performed during the pandemic when it came to providing financial support and most felt that the federal government had done well. Further, most mentioned that the speed at which Canadians received their benefits had remained strong throughout the course of the year.

Nevertheless, some concerns were raised about the level of financial support that was provided, with most noting the amount was insufficient. In a similar vein, some mentioned their drained savings and confusion on how the benefit amounts had been set.

CERB Repayment

A few participants had heard of the requirement for individuals to repay the CERB if they had received any payments due to a mistake. It was felt that a repayment could put these individuals in a difficult financial situation, especially given the rush to provide support during the initial period and that not a lot of clarification surrounding eligibility requirements were thought to be provided.

Additionally, nearly all participants thought that more time should be allowed to repay the taxes owing on the CERB. Participants felt that due to the ongoing pandemic and the period of financial uncertainty, many economic activities continued to be shut down, leaving people with reduced or no work.

When directly asked, most participants indicated that they would have to pay tax on the CERB benefits that they had received. It was shared by many participants that the requirement to pay tax was going to cause significant financial hardship.

Part II: Other Issues

French Language (GMA, Major Centres Atlantic Canada)

In a few groups, participants were asked about the Government of Canada's recent proposed amendments to the *Official Languages Act*. While a number of participants had not heard or read anything about the proposed amendment, those who had said it was their understanding that the objective was to ensure greater protection of the French language in Canada.

To gauge participants' thoughts related to the modernization of the *Official Languages Act*, five of the various amendments were highlighted and discussed with participants: increasing French immersion outside of Quebec, increasing Francophone immigration, strengthening the role of Radio Canada, appointing only bilingual Supreme Court justices, and strengthening the powers of the Commissioner of Official Languages. Although participants were, overall, generally supportive of the proposed amendments, the first of these gained the most traction with participants as most felt that real change in this regard was best introduced at the school level. Participants were less supportive of some of the other proposed amendments – they did not see a direct connection between Radio Canada and the protection of the French language and they were concerned that the requirement for Supreme Court justices to be bilingual would exclude a host of well-qualified candidates.

Those in the GMA, while supportive of the proposed amendments, felt they did not go far enough to effectively protect the French language. And, participants generally thought that French immersion programs should be extended to adults and others outside the school system.

Indigenous Issues (Quebec Indigenous Peoples)

Several issues pertinent to Indigenous Peoples were discussed in one focus group comprised of Indigenous participants residing in the province of Quebec. When asked about which key priorities for Indigenous people warranted greater attention from the federal government, the following were mentioned: the disproportionate number of Indigenous people in the welfare system, specifically in child welfare, support for at-risk Indigenous youth, development of a more comprehensive and culturally sensitive educational curriculum for Canadian schools and institutions on Indigenous history and rights, clean drinking water, and better job opportunities for Indigenous people, both in Canada and abroad.

Participants did acknowledge that the Government of Canada had made progress in some areas affecting Indigenous communities (e.g. some progress on boil water advisories, focus on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, and changes in how judges determine sentences for Indigenous offenders, based on the Gladue decision of the Supreme Court of Canada).

On the topic of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), participants expressed modest levels of awareness but felt that Canada had been late in signing on to this convention. There were also concerns expressed over continued delays in implementing the

provisions of UNDRIP in jurisdictions across Canada. To advance the conversation, participants were provided with more information about UNDRIP, including the main themes of the declaration. While supportive of the initiative, they remained skeptical that implementation would result in any real change in the lives of Indigenous people across Canada. Some were slightly more favourable in their views, but still thought the Government of Canada's actions were long overdue.

The discussion then turned to the Government of Canada's efforts to lift long-term drinking water advisories. Participants were provided with some information showing the latest Government of Canada efforts in this regard (see the infographic in the Detailed Findings). However, this did little to enhance participants' confidence. Although some indicated the information underscored clear progress, most remained frustrated at the ongoing nature of this issue. They were adamant that clean drinking water was not only a basic human right, but a critical necessity to be able to address the spread of COVID-19.

Finally, participants were told about a recent federal government announcement that the original target of March 2021 to end long-term drinking water advisories would not be met. At the same time, the government also announced additional funding to finish the work. While participants responded favourably to the news of increased investments, they remained concerned about ongoing delays and worried about how Canadian taxpayers would react upon hearing that significantly higher expenditures to complete the work were required. Most agreed that all Indigenous communities should have access to clean drinking water within the next year.

Homelessness (Mid-size and Major Centres Quebec Vaccine Hesitant)

In one group only, participants briefly discussed the issue of homelessness which most agreed was a problem in Canada, and one which they felt was getting worse. Some commented on the increased visibility and presence of homelessness within their communities and the fact that they encounter homeless people on a daily basis more so now than in the past. There was also a sense that this issue was quite prevalent in other communities outside the province – Vancouver was offered by way of example.

There was a consensus among participants that the Government of Canada had a role to play in tackling this problem, specifically by funding the expansion and development of social housing. At the same time, while participants were not convinced that the issue could be fully addressed within a 10-year period, many felt significant inroads could be made.

Participants considered three statements that could be used by the Government of Canada for general messaging on this subject: *Every Canadian deserves a safe and affordable place to call home; One homeless person in Canada is one too many; and, In a country such as Canada, no one should live on the street.* Most were drawn to the first statement – the emphasis on the creation of safe and affordable spaces resonated with many.

Online Hate (Alberta Vaccine Hesitant, Quebec Indigenous Peoples, Hamilton-Niagara Region Ontario Young Adults)

Participants discussed a range of aspects related to online activity particularly in the realm of online hate. At the outset of the discussion, most participants rejected the idea of placing limits on or regulating what is said online. They generally favoured an environment in which free speech is promoted even if that meant that offensive comments or material may appear online. A number of participants firmly supported free speech, commenting that a divergence of opinions and lively debate are vital to a healthy society.

When discussing some of the more negative aspects of online activity, participants expressed significant concerns about hate speech as well as online bullying of minority groups including those with varying ethno-cultural backgrounds and/or sexual orientation. Participants also generally agreed that child sexual exploitation along with the related issue of sharing private images online without permission were major issues in Canada and around the world. Several participants focused on incitement to violence as a priority, a particular concern viewed in light of the attack on the Capitol building in the United States which had occurred on January 6th, 2021. This issue was viewed as being linked to the issues of radicalization and political propaganda, about which they were generally less concerned. Issues of online terrorist propaganda did not register strongly with most participants.

Participants were asked whether the Government of Canada had a role to play in addressing these issues, or whether it should be left to the social media companies themselves. On balance, most favoured the latter approach. Their initial impression was that the Government of Canada could do little to regulate social media companies which were headquartered in foreign jurisdictions and they generally felt that cases of malicious or criminal online activity should be actively and rigorously pursued by law enforcement groups. They also viewed the social media companies themselves as being primarily responsible to self-regulate.

As participants considered aspects of these issues in more detail, opinions shifted somewhat. When participants were shown three specific actions which the Government of Canada could consider taking and asked which one should be its top priority, many participants continued to favour asking social media companies to increase their own monitoring, but also supported regulation of these companies so that there are rules on what needs to be taken down. On a more limited basis, a few participants supported increasing law enforcement monitoring online of things that are illegal under current laws. Overall, however, participants favoured a collaborative and step-wise approach seeing monitoring as a first step before taking actions which were deemed to be somewhat more heavy-handed.

A similar question was posed in terms of possible actions that social media companies could take, including: adding more filters to help users identify illegal or otherwise harmful content; creating stricter penalties for repeat abusers, including denying access to the platform; getting rid of trolls and bots; and providing more transparency regarding repeat abusers. In all groups, participants prioritized stricter penalties for repeat abusers. The general consensus was that this was the most consequential of the four options under consideration.

Having discussed various facets on the topic of online hate, participants ultimately tended to gravitate toward increased regulation of social media companies, even if that meant that legitimate material might be flagged or removed, versus a more hands off approach which could mean that things like hate speech or incitement to violence may cause harm to people. The primary concern was that an unrestrained social media environment could be injurious. Those who opposed increased regulation worried, however, that this would be the first step toward wider federal government involvement in this area and possibly even tougher restrictions in the future.

Childcare (GVA Parents with Children in Daycare or Considering Daycare, Mid-size and Major Centres Quebec Vaccine Hesitant, Alberta Vaccine Hesitant, Major Centres Saskatchewan Parents of School Aged Children)

In four groups, two of which were specifically comprised of parents with children in daycare or considering daycare as a childcare option, participants shared their perceptions regarding childcare services in their area and discussed their views on proposed Government of Canada investments in childcare.

While views on local childcare services varied across the locations in which groups were undertaken, many participants, particularly parents of young children, expressed concerns about access to childcare and lengthy waitlists. When asked about areas for improvement, participants' suggestions aligned with their concerns. Many felt that issues related to the availability and affordability of childcare services needed to be addressed, while some also commented on the need for specialized childcare services for children with special needs.

Relatively few participants were aware of the Government of Canada's plans related to childcare, although some parents were vaguely aware of the possibility of a national childcare program being implemented. Others had heard something about \$10 a day daycare being instituted. When it was clarified that the Government of Canada had indicated that it wanted to make significant, long-term, sustained investment to create a Canada-wide early learning and childcare system, including further support for Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care, reactions were generally positive and even more so among the groups with parents. They placed importance on early childhood education as well as ensuring equitable and fair access to daycare. Any skepticism that was expressed centered on concerns that investments in this area might infringe on provincial responsibilities or reduce funding in other areas (issue raised mostly in Quebec) or on the timing and what these investments might mean, in reality, for parents with children in daycare.

A number of participants, again mostly parents, made the argument that, despite the currently large deficit, investments in childcare would help to ensure that more people, especially women, could engage in the workforce and help to grow the economy and contribute to enlarging the tax base. Others pointed out that investments in children should be prioritized as this demographic represents the future workforce and taxpayers – they focused on the larger issue of providing children with a solid foundation, specifically in terms of their educational and social formation. These arguments found some traction in those groups where participants expressed somewhat less support for investments in childcare at this time, specifically groups in Quebec and Alberta. Nevertheless, those in Alberta

remained concerned about the range of economic challenges facing the province and the country as a result of a downturn in the oil and gas sector and the pandemic. The point was also made among some participants in Alberta, that childcare should be a personal choice.

Participants reflected on the following three arguments in favour of investing in childcare:

- *Childcare is important since it allows more women to enter the workforce*
- *Childcare grows the economy because it allows more people to work*
- *More childcare spaces mean less financial pressures on hard working middle class families*

While a number of participants felt that all three reasons had merit, most found the second and third statements to be the most compelling. In particular, they viewed childcare as key to growing the economy, allowing more people to work, and reducing the financial pressures for families, especially those with multiple children in daycare. Some objected to the focus on women in the first statement, believing that childcare should not be the purview of women only, but should be framed within a broader and more inclusive context.

To conclude the discussion, participants were shown two messages regarding childcare and asked about their preference:

- *Investing in accessible, high-quality, affordable and inclusive childcare is not only good for families, it makes good economic sense.*
- *High quality, affordable childcare is not a luxury, it is a necessity. That is why we are creating a national system that will cut costs and create more spaces.*

Overall, the consensus was that childcare should be viewed as a necessity. Parents in particular, in the groups held in the GVA and Saskatchewan, gravitated to this message. Some felt the statement was reassuring in the sense that it suggested there was an organized plan to make child care affordable given the reference to a 'national system.'

A final line of questioning was asked regarding possible things the federal government could do as part of its plan for a Canada-wide early learning and childcare system. Participants were shown three possible options, as follows:

- *Cutting the cost of childcare by \$5,000 a year by next year, and eventually cutting it by \$7,500.*
- *Cutting the cost of childcare in half to start, and eventually reducing it by 75%.*
- *Putting a cap of \$20 a day on childcare costs next year, and eventually lowering it to \$10 a day.*

Most participants in both groups selected the last as they felt this option was the clearest. It very plainly indicated what the cost of daycare would be for parents (e.g., the use of a dollar figure in the third option was more meaningful as compared to the percentage reductions referred to in the first and second options). By contrast, participants had some difficulty understanding what the first two options implied with respect to the actual financial implications for parents. Lastly, participants were asked that if the Government of Canada were to cut costs by \$5,000, if it would be better to send a rebate to parents, or if they should find a way to make sure that the actual costs that are charged by

the daycare provider are reduced. Most favoured the former over the latter. Participants were of the view that parents should receive the rebate given they are paying out of pocket for childcare services.

Public Transit (GVA Parents with Children in Daycare or Considering Daycare, Mid-size and Major Centres Quebec Vaccine Hesitant, Major Centres B.C. Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours, Kitchener to SW Ontario Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours, Major Centres Atlantic Canada)

In several groups, participants were asked for their perspective on Government of Canada investment in public transit and whether they were aware of any current investments in their community in recent years. To start the conversation, participants were queried on their use of public transit currently and prior to the pandemic. Overall, few respondents reported using public transit before the pandemic and even fewer were doing so currently.

When asked if the Government of Canada should invest in public transit, there was a consensus in favour of the idea across all groups. Participants residing in the GVA expressed support for investment and remarked that public transit is an enabler of affordable housing for families, as it allows people to live in more affordable areas and still be able to commute to work. Additionally, environmental and economic arguments were made in favour of investment. Participants in the major centres British Columbia group, similar to those in the GVA parents' group, universally supported federal investment in public transit. Participants perceived the importance of public transit by reducing traffic congestion and the accompanying environmental benefits. Similar arguments were raised in the Kitchener to SW Ontario group. Participants viewed public transit as integral to the structure of growing cities, good for the environment and an important alternative for those without vehicles. Opinions in the Quebec group were more evenly mixed, for and against the idea. Arguments in favour centred on the issue of affordability while those against investment made the jurisdictional point that public transit was a provincial responsibility. Support for investment by the Government of Canada in public transit was lowest in the Atlantic Canada group. The lack of transit within and between communities in the region meant that participants had adjusted to a car-centric culture.

Participants were then asked if they were aware of any investments in public transit in their region by the Government of Canada, and what they thought the biggest transit needs were. In the GVA parents' group, the greatest transit need was seen to be accessibility, creating more affordable options and extending service. In Quebec, participants could not recall specific Government of Canada investments in public transit and perceived the transit sector in Quebec overall as being in good shape. Participants residing in major centres of British Columbia were less aware of Government of Canada investments in public transit. Among those who were aware, mentions included investments in bridges and extensions of the SkyTrain. Participants viewed increasing the frequency of service to smaller centres as the greatest transit need. In the Kitchener to SW Ontario group, participants were not aware of any federal investment in local public transit however, many identified the greatest transit needs as creating a link to the GTA and improving connections between cities such as London, Sarnia and Windsor. Participants in the major centres Atlantic region were aware of some Government of Canada investment for public transit such as resources for the ferry service and Confederation Bridge.

Participants identified the greatest needs in their region as being affordability, accessibility, fare schemes, rural service, interprovincial service and the challenge of providing and paying for public transit for an aging population.

Toxins (Manitoba EI/Recovery Benefits Recipients, Smaller and Rural Centres Ontario, GMA, Kitchener to SW Ontario Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours, Major Centres Atlantic Canada)

In five groups throughout the month, participants discussed various aspects on the topic of toxins, including the degree to which this issue is top-of-mind as well as their understanding of and views on the current laws in this area, the perceived need for regulation and any concerns they may have about the impact of banning or regulating toxins and chemicals on both businesses and consumers.

When asked what they viewed as the biggest environmental priorities, those on which they felt the Government of Canada should focus, participants raised a number of issues with a particular focus on reducing carbon emissions, clean and renewable energy sources, and sustainable living, among others. Issues related to toxins and chemicals were raised peripherally by a few participants only who identified poisons, pesticides and plastics as particular environmental concerns. However, when the topic of toxins and chemicals was raised more directly, participants expressed concerns about their pervasiveness and use in specific sectors (e.g., antibiotics used in agricultural production, chemicals in the food supply, specifically pesticide residues and preservatives, toxins in the water and air, industrial emissions). The consensus view was that chemicals and toxins were being used excessively and that more stringent oversight was required. Participants were particularly concerned about chemicals and toxins in the air and water, rather than those in household products. Although they saw these two issues as interconnected, many felt that the issue of air and water quality was wide-ranging, with a significant global impact in terms of environmental degradation. Participants commented on the complexity of this issue, with many suggesting that environmental degradation was at the root of many health issues, both broadly and within specific communities.

Although most participants were not highly familiar with the current laws regarding chemicals and toxins, most had the impression that they could or should be strengthened as they felt their use was becoming more prevalent, leaving future generations vulnerable to their effects. When discussing the implications of more regulation, with respect to possible additional costs to consumers, some participants were comfortable knowing they may have to pay more for products, while others questioned why consumer costs would rise in conjunction with stricter regulations in this area.

To conclude the discussion, participants were shown a few different things that Government of Canada could focus on with respect to chemicals and toxins and subsequently asked to pick the one they felt should be the biggest priority:

- *Banning some chemicals so that companies need to use less harmful ones*
- *Ensuring people who work in workplaces with chemicals are safe*
- *Providing more information on labels about chemicals in household products*

- *Using new science to better understand the impact on our health of every day exposure to several chemicals*

In about equal numbers, participants identified using new science and banning some chemicals as their biggest priority. Far fewer participants chose the option of providing more information on labels about chemicals in household products. Relatively few prioritized ensuring people who work in workplaces with chemicals are safe.

In terms of the preferred approach to addressing this issue, participants leaned towards government working collaboratively with businesses as a first step before implementing more stringent measures such as regulations, which would outright ban the use of certain toxins and chemicals. While some participants worried that stricter measures may have adverse effects on jobs, businesses and the economy, others thought that corporations would be unlikely to proactively make changes in their use of certain toxins or chemicals.

Environment (Manitoba EI/Recovery Benefits Recipients, Smaller and Rural Centres Ontario, Major Centres B.C. Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours, GMA, Major Centres Atlantic Canada)

The environment and related topics were discussed in several groups, specifically participants' awareness and views on the Government of Canada's plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions over the next decade. While many participants remained focused primarily on news and information regarding the ongoing pandemic, some were generally aware of the federal government's plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, recalling some aspects of the details although only vaguely.

For further clarification, participants were told that the Government of Canada has proposed measures aimed at helping Canada cut greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 and getting the country to net-zero emissions by 2050. They were also told that one of the proposed measures included helping Canadian businesses to invest in more efficient and cost-effective technologies that would both improve their operations and their bottom line. Participants then discussed how the plan should be framed, considering the following five options:

- *A strategy to help businesses cut pollution*
- *A strategy to help sectors across our economy cut pollution*
- *Clean industrial strategy*
- *Low-carbon industrial strategy*
- *Strategy for cleaner industry*

While reaction to all of the options put forward was generally positive, participants tended to gravitate to two in particular: *Clean industrial strategy* and *Strategy for cleaner industry*. These options resonated with participants for a range of reasons. The phrasing itself was viewed as simple, direct and straightforward and many appreciated the focus of the strategy being framed positively in terms of the key benefit (e.g. *clean industrial strategy*) rather than negatively (e.g. cutting pollution). There were also concerns raised about referring to a 'low-carbon' industrial strategy, with some feeling that over-

use of this term has led to more confusion among the public and some desensitization regarding what exactly this term means.

Participants were less supportive of the other three options. Overall, while they had some merit in terms of framing the plan as a collaborative effort, they were generally viewed as much less straightforward.

Participants debated the use of the term 'strategy' in all options, with some suggesting that 'action plan' may be a more appropriate substitute, alluding to more concrete activities and solutions. And, overall, there was general agreement among participants that the plan should be framed in a way which was both targeted to higher polluters and inclusive at the same time. In addition, they felt the plan should also be broadly encompassing of all players within Canada's economy.

Firearms (GMA, Kitchener to SW Ontario Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours)

Participants in two groups were asked whether they had seen, read or heard about the Government of Canada's new firearms measures. Overall, unprompted awareness was modest with most participants stating that they had heard of the proposed measures and some recalling the buy-back program.

After clarifying the new measures in place (see Detailed Findings for the description provided) many participants agreed that new legislation on assault-style firearms was a positive step forward, indicating that they believed was a good to have better controls on firearms in Canada. However, some expressed frustration at what they believed to be excessive bureaucracy making gun ownership difficult for law-abiding, responsible gun owners. A few participants were concerned about putting the responsibility for gun bans onto municipalities and believed that such regulations should be consistent across the country.

After being read a statement clarifying the buy-back program for participants (see Detailed Findings for the description provided), participants did not believe this program would be successful in getting such firearms off the street. They remarked that gun-related crimes were not typically committed by responsible owners that would likely abide by this legislation, but instead were carried out by those who obtained firearms illegally. Some participants also questioned how the federal government would be able to enforce these new measures.

Asked if they thought that those who owned barred firearms would turn them in or keep them, participants' views were split. Those who believed most would return them suggested that owners would be motivated to return it for payment, while others who believed most would not return the firearms suggested they would want to keep them for sentimental value or had other intentions to use them for the wrong purposes.

To conclude the discussion, when asked what a better approach would be, the buy-back approach described or a mandatory buy-back program, most preferred the first option. Participants felt a mandatory approach (where those who own barred firearms must participate) would be too excessive of a control measure for the federal government to implement and could be seen as an infringement on property rights of Canadians. Others remarked that they felt there would be little harm in one

having such a firearm in their possession if they were not using it and that for some owners not having a firearm may leave them with a lost sense of security or safety.

Mandatory Minimum Penalties (GMA, Major Centres Atlantic Canada)

Participants residing in the GMA and in major centres across Atlantic Canada were asked if they had heard anything about any changes to mandatory minimum penalties in sentencing, to which most said they had not.

Before continuing with the conversation, participants were provided further information about the changes to mandatory minimum penalties in sentencing. In reaction to the provided information, participants agreed that increased flexibility in sentencing (especially for drug offences) and the ability for case-by-case decision making were favourable impacts of removing certain mandatory minimums. It was also thought that the elimination of many mandatory minimum penalties might help to alleviate the backlog in the judicial system.

Statements Regarding the Government of Canada's Approach

Participants were then provided with a list of four possible statements (found in the detailed findings section of this report) and asked to identify which one(s) made them feel better about the Government of Canada's approach to the reform of mandatory minimum penalties.

Overall, all four statements were received favourably. Participants explained that all of the statements indicated that tax dollars were going to be spent on the more serious crimes and less on the not so serious offences. They also felt that current mandatory minimum penalties disproportionately impact racialized Canadians. Participants also cited mental health and the need for treatment as opposed to incarceration as an argument in favour of flexibility, as well as removing bottlenecks from the judicial system.

Participants were then shown the same list of statements and asked if any made them feel worse about the federal government's approach, to which participants had a hard time identifying any.

MORE INFORMATION

The Strategic Counsel
Contract number: 35035-182346/001/CY
Contract award date: December 18, 2020
Contract value: \$1,618,838.00
