



Government
of Canada

Gouvernement
du Canada

Continuous Qualitative Data Collection of Canadians' Views – February 2022

Executive Summary

Prepared for the Privy Council Office

Supplier name: The Strategic Counsel

Contract number: 35035-182346/001/CY

Contract value: \$2,428,991.50

Award date: December 16, 2021

Delivery date: April 22, 2022

Registration number: POR-005-19

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

Ce rapport est aussi disponible en français.

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 the 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 28th, 2022 in multiple locations across the country including Atlantic Canada, Quebec, Ontario, Nunavut, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia. Details concerning the locations, recruitment, and composition of the groups are outlined 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. Regarding what Canadians were hearing about the Government of Canada in the news, many discussed the removal of border entry requirement exemptions for certain categories of travellers entering Canada, protests regarding pandemic-related mandates, and the federal government's decisions to invoke (and subsequently revoke) the Emergencies Act in order to put an end to the protests. Unrelated to the pandemic, many also referenced hearing about the emerging conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

Participants were also asked for their general outlooks on COVID-19, including whether restrictions should be lifted or remain in place, forecasts regarding the spread of COVID-19 in the near and long-term, perspectives related to regional public health restrictions, as well as the ongoing campaign encouraging Canadians to receive their third dose of the COVID-19 vaccine. Indigenous peoples living on reserve in Saskatchewan and Manitoba and parents of children under the age of 12 residing in the Durham region of Ontario and mid-size centres in Saskatchewan were additionally asked for their views on COVID-19 vaccines for children aged 5-11. Related to this, the group from the Durham region were also shown two potential digital advertising concepts created by the Government of Canada, encouraging parents with children in this age group to get their kids vaccinated.

In addition to the pandemic, non-COVID-19 related discussions were undertaken on a range of topics including child care and recent agreements reached between the federal government and numerous provinces and territories, provincial/territorial healthcare systems, as well as potential actions by the Government of Canada related to affordable housing and home renting. Additionally, Indigenous peoples living on reserve in Saskatchewan and Manitoba discussed issues related to their local communities and Indigenous peoples more broadly. Conversations were also held regarding youth and post-secondary issues, official language minority communities, and the affordability of mobile phone plans within Canada. Other topics included Canadian content (focusing on film, television, and music) as well as local issues specific to Nunavut and Prince Edward Island respectively.

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 of children under 12, renters, post-secondary students, individuals who had previously tested positive for COVID-19, Francophones, and Indigenous peoples living on reserve.

Detailed Approach

- 12 focus groups across various regions in Canada.
- Five groups were conducted with the general population in the Bas-Saint-Laurent, Gaspésie, Côte-Nord regions of Quebec, central and southern Quebec, Nunavut, Winnipeg, and Prince Edward Island.
- Seven groups were conducted with key subgroups including:
 - Parents of children under 12 residing in the Durham region in Ontario and mid-size centres in Saskatchewan;
 - Renters residing in the Okanagan region of British Columbia;
 - Post-secondary students residing in the Hamilton and Niagara region of Ontario;
 - Individuals who had tested positive for COVID-19 residing in Edmonton;
 - Francophones residing in the Sudbury region of Ontario; and
 - Indigenous peoples living on reserve in Saskatchewan and Manitoba.
- The groups in Quebec were both conducted in French as was the group comprised of Francophones in the Sudbury region. All other groups 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, 84 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
Durham Region – Ontario	1	English	Feb. 2	6:00-8:00 pm	Parents of Children under 12	7
Bas-Saint-Laurent / Gaspésie / Côte-Nord regions – Quebec	2	French	Feb. 3	6:00-8:00 pm	General Population	6
Mid-size Centres Saskatchewan	3	English	Feb. 8	7:00-9:00 pm	Parents of Children under 12	7
Okanagan Region – British Columbia	4	English	Feb. 9	9:00-11:00 pm	Renters	8
Nunavut	5	English	Feb. 10	6:00-8:00 pm	General Population	8
Hamilton & Niagara Region – Ontario	6	English	Feb. 15	6:00-8:00 pm	Post-Secondary Students	7

Edmonton	7	English	Feb. 16	8:00-10:00 pm	Tested Positive for COVID-19	7
Winnipeg	8	English	Feb. 17	7:00-9:00 pm	General Population	8
Prince Edward Island	9	English	Feb. 22	5:00-7:00 pm	General Population	7
Sudbury Region – Ontario	10	French	Feb. 23	6:00-8:00 pm	Francophones	8
Central/Southern Quebec	11	French	Feb. 24	6:00-8:00 pm	General Population	6
Saskatchewan & Manitoba	12	English	Feb. 28	8:00-10:00 pm	Indigenous Peoples Living on Reserve	5
Total number of participants						84

Key Findings

Part I: COVID-19 Related Findings

Government of Canada in the News (All Locations)

Among recent federal announcements and initiatives in the news in the month of February, items related to the COVID-19 pandemic were once again top of mind among participants. Regarding the pandemic, the most commonly cited issue, by far, was the trucker convoy protests taking place in Ottawa and at several Canada/U.S. border crossings in other parts of the country. Among the groups held later in the month, most recalled the federal government's implementation (and subsequent removal) of the Emergencies Act, particularly focusing on aspects of the legislation such as the ability of law enforcement to temporarily freeze the bank accounts of some of those participating in or financially supporting the protests.

Among other domestic issues, some mentioned the decision by the Bank of Canada to hold off on raising interest rates for the time being, as well as concerns regarding inflation and a perceived rapid increase of oil and gas prices in many parts of the country.

On the international stage, many groups discussed the emerging conflict between Russia and Ukraine. This was especially the case in those groups conducted near the end of February in the days just prior to and directly following the Russian invasion on February 24th, 2022. Participants recalled a number of news stories, actions, and announcements related to the Government of Canada's response to this situation, including the provision of financial aid and military supplies to Ukraine, the deployment of Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) troops to Eastern Europe, and the imposition of sanctions on numerous Russian individuals and entities.

Convoy Protests (Durham Region Parents of Children under 12, Bas-Saint-Laurent/Gaspésie/Côte-Nord Regions, Mid-size Centres Saskatchewan Parents of Children under 12, Okanagan Region Home Renters, Hamilton and Niagara Region Post-Secondary Students, Edmonton Tested Positive for COVID-19, Winnipeg, Prince Edward Island, Sudbury Region Francophones, Central and Southern Quebec)

In the groups held earlier in February, few participants initially recalled hearing anything about the Government of Canada removing the exemption from federal border entry requirements for certain categories of travellers, including truck drivers. After receiving further details regarding this decision and its implications, several expressed a greater understanding of the connection between this issue and the protests taking place in Ottawa and several other parts of the country.

Many were aware that protestors had travelled from all across the country to participate in these demonstrations, which had led to the blockade of major roadways in the City of Ottawa as well as at numerous Canada-U.S. border crossings. In addition, a number of participants had heard accounts of protestors creating large-scale noise disturbances in Ottawa, as well as accosting healthcare workers and other individuals choosing to wear facemasks as they went about their daily activities. Many were aware that the Ottawa Police Service (OPS) had encountered great difficulty in clearing the protests and felt they lacked the necessary resources to do so.

Participants shared a wide variety of views regarding the protests, though on balance more were opposed to than supportive of these demonstrations. Many expressed disapproval of what they viewed as the harassment of Ottawa residents by the protestors, feeling this had discredited the movement as a whole. A number of participants also felt the protests had become somewhat directionless as they went on and were no longer about ending COVID-19 related mandates, especially given that many public health measures had been (or would soon be) lifted in several provinces and territories throughout Canada. A significant number, however, identified with the frustration expressed by the protestors regarding ongoing public health measures, even if they disagreed with some of their methods. Among participants who were more supportive of the protests and their aims, it was felt the protests had been mostly peaceful and that these individuals had the right to express their opinion via public protest.

Government of Canada Response and Emergencies Act (Edmonton Tested Positive for COVID-19, Winnipeg, Prince Edward Island, Sudbury Region Francophones, Central and Southern Quebec)

Five groups held in the latter half of February discussed the enactment of the Emergencies Act by the federal government on February 14th, 2022.

Almost all participants in these groups recalled hearing at least something about the Emergencies Act, with many specifically mentioning the aspect of the legislation allowing law enforcement to temporarily freeze the bank accounts of those participating in or financially associated with the protests. While several felt these enhanced law enforcement powers would likely be effective in clearing the protests, a smaller number were worried the use of this Act would cause further conflict or potential for violence by escalating the tensions between protestors and law enforcement.

Though a small number of participants felt implementing the Emergencies Act was a necessary step given the disturbance caused by the seemingly indefinite nature of the protests, most felt this action represented significant 'overreach' by the federal government, as they interpreted this as limiting the right of these Canadians to peaceful protest. Among those who supported the federal government's use of the Emergencies Act, it was generally viewed as the most straightforward way to clear the blockade in Ottawa, where many felt local law enforcement had lost control of the situation. Asked how they felt the Government of Canada should have responded, those opposed to the use of the Emergencies Act suggested more steps could have been taken by federal officials to open up a dialogue with the protestors and hear their concerns.

Taking place after the protests had been cleared and the revocation of the Emergencies Act on February 23rd, 2022, the groups from the Sudbury region and southern and central Quebec were asked for their views regarding this decision. While most were happy to see these emergency measures removed, participants reached different conclusions about what this decision implied. Some viewed the revocation of the Act as a reasonable decision and sign of good faith by the federal government as well as proof the legislation had worked as intended. In contrast, others viewed the quick removal as evidence the law should never have been used in the first place, feeling the Government of Canada was essentially retracting its initial decision to invoke the Act.

COVID-19 Outlook and Vaccines (All Locations)

Participants in all groups discussed a wide range of issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the Government of Canada's ongoing response. These conversations focused on federal performance over the course of the pandemic, ongoing public health measures, COVID-19 vaccinations for children, and the ongoing campaign encouraging Canadians to get their third dose of the COVID-19 vaccine, otherwise known as the 'booster dose'.

COVID-19 Performance Evaluation (Bas-Saint-Laurent/Gaspésie/Côte-Nord Regions, Okanagan Region Home Renters, Nunavut, Edmonton Tested Positive for COVID-19, Prince Edward Island, Sudbury Region Francophones, Central and Southern Quebec)

To begin, participants were asked to recall anything they thought the Government of Canada had done well in its handling of the pandemic. This prompted a number of responses, including the implementation of and continued encouragement towards following public health measures, consistent communication from federal officials throughout the pandemic, restricting non-essential travel early in the pandemic, a willingness to adapt border entry requirements as new variants of concern were detected, the provision of financial supports such as the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), the widespread and efficient distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, and the provision of food supplies in Northern communities through the Nutrition North Canada program.

Asked to identify areas where the Government of Canada's response could have been improved, participants also put forward a number of opinions. These included what was felt to be a lack of transparency regarding the scientific basis for ongoing mandates and public health requirements, the need for clearer goals and criteria regarding steps to return to greater normalcy, perceived delays in

closing international borders and halting non-essential travel in the early months of the pandemic, limited testing availability during the recent Omicron wave of the pandemic, and perceived inefficient management of the CERB and other financial supports.

Discussing whether they felt the federal government's handling of the pandemic was currently better, worse, or about the same compared to earlier on in the pandemic, many felt the Government of Canada's performance had worsened as the pandemic had drawn on. A significant number believed there to be a general lack of direction in the current federal approach, especially in regards to lifting restrictions (which some conflated with provincial/territorial measures). A number of participants also thought current messaging from the federal government was somewhat negative at times, and that more could be done to reassure Canadians and communicate appreciation for their efforts to help contain the spread of the virus for almost two years. Many participants also thought more needed to be done to address the mental health implications of the pandemic and related public safety measures, which they viewed as a rapidly growing concern among Canadians that had the potential to be more damaging than the virus itself. A number of participants felt the Government of Canada could help address this by placing a greater focus on lifting mandates and public health requirements wherever possible (with some again seeming to refer to provincial/territorial measures).

For the smaller number who thought the federal government's performance was better now compared to earlier in the pandemic, the general sense was that policymakers now had a better understanding of COVID-19 and were able to handle the pandemic more effectively as a result. Among those who felt the Government of Canada's performance had remained about the same throughout the pandemic, the general sense was that the government had performed fairly well overall, despite some missteps along the way, and that a consistent effort had been made to follow the science and adapt to new information and knowledge as it became available.

COVID-19 Public Health Measures and Forecast (Bas-Saint-Laurent/Gaspésie/Côte-Nord Regions, Okanagan Region Home Renters, Nunavut, Hamilton and Niagara Region Post-Secondary Students, Edmonton Tested Positive for COVID-19, Winnipeg, Prince Edward Island, Sudbury Region Francophones, Central and Southern Quebec, Saskatchewan and Manitoba Indigenous Peoples)

Ten groups discussed COVID-19 public health measures in their regions, as well as their opinions regarding how the pandemic may evolve going forward.

Asked if they felt restrictions should be loosened in their regions, participants were mixed in their views. While a larger number felt the majority of public health requirements should be lifted in the near future, some favoured either a more gradual removal or even keeping some requirements in place, such as proof of vaccination systems, for the time being. A smaller number of participants were opposed to removing restrictions at this juncture, believing it would put vulnerable groups, such as seniors, immunocompromised individuals, and young children, at risk. While acknowledging the negative impact and inconvenience of public health restrictions, these participants tended to view them as necessary in the short-term to keep Canadians safe.

Most participants felt the worst of the pandemic had likely passed, given the perceived mildness of the recent Omicron variant, the high vaccination rate among Canadians, and the natural immunity to the virus they felt had likely been acquired by many following the most recent wave of the pandemic. A smaller number were more pessimistic, believing it was still possible for more severe variants to emerge. Asked whether they felt COVID-19 would still be an issue one year from now, almost all participants believed the virus would still be around in some form or another for many years to come, however most also believed it would begin to fade into the background and become an 'endemic' issue similar to influenza and other seasonal viruses. Many expected an annual booster dose of the COVID-19 vaccine may be required going forward.

The groups from Winnipeg, Sudbury, and southern and central Quebec, as well as the group comprised of Indigenous peoples in Saskatchewan and Manitoba, were asked an additional question regarding the impact of public health measures and if they felt they had been effective in curbing the spread of COVID-19. Many felt they had, especially in the early stages of the pandemic, however others were more skeptical and pointed to shifting opinions among public health officials about what worked and what did not. More prominently, a large number of participants said they were more concerned about the negative consequences of these public health measures, especially in regards to social isolation and its effects on the mental wellbeing of Canadians, particularly elders and young people, as well as the financial impacts of temporary business closures and capacity restrictions.

The group in Winnipeg was also asked an additional question regarding how the pandemic and related public health measures had impacted the downtown area and small businesses within the community. All participants felt the pandemic had negatively impacted local businesses, believing the majority of the businesses in the downtown core had been hurt by the pandemic, with many closing permanently as a result.

COVID-19 Vaccines for Children (Durham Region Parents of Children under 12, Mid-size Centres Saskatchewan Parents of Children under 12, Saskatchewan and Manitoba Indigenous Peoples)

Three groups were asked a series of questions related to the COVID-19 vaccine for children ages 5-11. On balance, fewer participants reported having gotten their children vaccinated relative to those who had chosen to hold off for the time being. Among those who had vaccinated their children, many had done so out of the desire to protect their kids against COVID-19 as well as provide additional security for more vulnerable family members with whom they frequently interact, such as grandparents. Among those who had not yet had their children vaccinated, few were against it in principle or on the basis of any ideological opposition to vaccines in general. Many, however, relayed concerns about the potential side effects of the COVID-19 vaccine, particularly regarding its relatively short track record of use and what they felt to be a lack of assurance on the part of medical experts regarding possible long term impacts. Some also felt the risk of COVID-19 to young children was quite low and cited this as the primary factor in their decision to hold off vaccinating their children for the time being.

COVID-19 Booster Dose (Edmonton Tested Positive for COVID-19, Winnipeg, Sudbury Region Francophones, Central and Southern Quebec, Saskatchewan and Manitoba Indigenous Peoples)

Asked whether they had received a third dose of the COVID-19 vaccine, also known as the 'booster dose', slightly less than half of participants in these groups said they had done so. Of those who had received their booster dose, almost all said they had done so in order to protect themselves as well as family members, friends, and others they interact with who may be more vulnerable. Among those who had not yet received their booster, the primary driver behind this decision was a lack of confidence in the efficacy of the vaccine and whether it would have a tangible impact on preventing them from contracting or spreading COVID-19. A number of participants clarified that while they had gotten their initial vaccines, the massive increase of transmissibility and positive cases among both vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals during the recent Omicron wave had limited their desire for a third dose, believing it would have little effect.

COVID-19 Vaccine Ad Testing (Durham Region Parents of Children under 12)

Parents with children under the age of 12 residing in the Durham region in Ontario were shown two concepts under development by the Government of Canada for possible advertising regarding COVID-19 vaccines. Prior to evaluating the concepts participants were asked whether their children had been vaccinated. Roughly an equal amount had gotten their children vaccinated as those who had decided to hold off for the time being.

Participants were then asked to review the two concepts (Concept A and Concept B), presented to the group in storyboard format. The group was also informed these advertisements were specifically designed to air on social media and digital platforms.

Concept A: Public Health Ad Campaign – Kids Vaccine

Concept A showed a line drawing of a family holding hands, with the line changing into different scenarios and eventually turning into the vaccine icon. Initial reactions to this concept were generally positive, with most finding the tone to be uplifting and hopeful. It was also felt the concept was direct and to the point, focusing on the benefits of getting children vaccinated and, as a result, being able to resume the kinds of activities that children and families enjoyed prior to the onset of the pandemic. Participants specifically liked the use of familiar imagery to which they could relate, commenting positively on the images of mothers, fathers, and children hugging, playing, and enjoying themselves as a family.

At the same time, several were critical of certain elements or aspects of this concept. Some found the visuals of the concept to be somewhat 'generic' due to the use of the stylized line drawing approach, feeling it to be somewhat aloof. The suggestion was also made that the narrative could have acknowledged what parents and children had endured over the course of the pandemic prior to focusing on the activities they were now able to enjoy. Some also felt this concept would likely not speak to those parents more skeptical of the vaccine, believing it did little to assuage any doubts they may be harbouring regarding its safety or efficacy.

When asked to describe the main message of this concept, most participants reiterated earlier comments that the ad was focused on promoting vaccinations for children as well as conveying the accompanying benefits of being vaccinated. Though participants understood the concept was intended to be a short 30-second video, they felt the explanation as to why the vaccine was necessary for children to be somewhat lacking. Related to this, several participants commented that the decision to get their children vaccinated was a highly personal one, and should be left up to parents based on their own personal assessment of the risks given their specific circumstances.

Overall, few participants indicated that Concept A would entice them to go to the website for more information or that it would prompt them to consider getting their children, aged 5 to 11 years, vaccinated. Recommendations to improve the effectiveness of this concept included acknowledging the isolating and devastating effects of the pandemic prior to shifting to a more upbeat message, as well as providing greater transparency regarding vaccines for children, specifically concrete data and statistics with respect to efficacy as well as any possible side effects.

Concept B: Public Health Ad Campaign – Kids Vaccine

Concept B showed parents protecting their children in different kinds of scenarios. Reactions to this concept were generally more positive, relative to Concept A. Many felt this concept was more effective at tapping into the protective nature of parents and extending this idea to vaccinations. They also found this concept more relatable both from the standpoint of the imagery, but also with respect to the emotions one feels as a parent wanting to protect their children in a range of day-to-day situations.

Most felt the main message or key takeaway from this concept was that parents should take steps to better protect their children by having them vaccinated for COVID-19. Participants responded positively to the creative approach, describing this concept as more 'real', and feeling it spoke in a more relevant and relatable way to them as parents of young children. Many did, however, suggest several possible improvements, including placing greater emphasis on the notion of vaccinations as a path to greater normalcy (as was the theme for Concept A) and the inclusion of other examples of actions parents take to keep their children safe, such as visits to the dentist or optometrist.

All participants expressed a preference for Concept B, believing it featured more engaging visuals as well as a realistic and relatable approach. Given the seriousness of COVID-19, participants also commented that messaging focused more clearly on protecting children from the possible negative impacts of the virus was more meaningful relative to the idea of lifting restrictions and a return to normalcy. Ultimately, most believed that emphasizing the idea of safety was the more effective approach.

Part II: Other Issues

Child Care (Durham Region Parents of Children under 12, Mid-size Centres Saskatchewan Parents of Children under 12, Nunavut)

Three groups engaged in discussions regarding child care, particularly focusing on affordability. To begin, participants were asked to describe what they felt to be the biggest challenge related to child care in their respective province or territory. A number of common themes emerged including cost and affordability, low availability, a lack of qualified staff, limited flexibility/accessibility, as well as a lack of regulation, particularly regarding 'unlicensed' child care providers. Participants in the group from Nunavut also described major challenges related to recruiting early childhood educators to Northern communities, including difficulty finding adequate, affordable housing for these individuals.

A few participants in each group currently had children in child care. These participants were asked to describe their personal experiences related to cost and availability. Among these participants, most reported paying high fees, often of \$50 a day/per child or more, as well as finding it incredibly difficult to secure a space, even for those who could afford the high costs. All participants felt child care to be an important priority and one the Government of Canada should place increased focus upon.

Participants were asked a series of questions related to the federal government's child-care initiative, specifically related to their particular province or territory.

Many in the group from Ontario were aware of recent agreements between the federal government and provinces/territories to implement an affordable child care program across the country, with some recalling the average of \$10 a day, per child target. Unprompted, a number of participants also recalled hearing that Ontario was the only province/territory at the time this group was held to have not yet reached an agreement with the federal government. Some expressed frustration, feeling the delay was possibly a negotiating tactic on the part of the provincial government. Others felt the size of Ontario compared to other provinces and territories may have made the negotiations for their province more complex or time-consuming.

Only a few in the group from Saskatchewan reported any awareness of the affordable child care agreement reached between Saskatchewan and the Government of Canada. Among current and potential users of child care, most believed the program would benefit them in a number of meaningful ways, including reducing the financial worries and challenges related to securing child care, enabling them to return to work or school, and even providing them with the confidence to have additional children by lowering associated costs. Among those whose children no longer required child care or would be too old by 2025-26 when the agreement would be fully implemented, most felt that even if they would not personally benefit, this deal was important and would offer much needed assistance to many Saskatchewan families.

Most participants in the group from Nunavut were aware of the recent affordable child care agreement reached by the Government of Canada and their territory in January. As in the Ontario group, there was specific recall of the \$10-a-day target. A few also reported hearing there would be additional funding for infrastructure upgrades to child care facilities as well as increased financial support for child care providers and their employees. While most felt this agreement would be helpful for Nunavut families, some reiterated their concern that child care issues may continue to persist given the

lack of physical space and problems recruiting qualified staff to the region. A few were also doubtful the agreement could be implemented within the timeline provided, believing that necessary infrastructure upgrades and other challenges, such as providing housing for child care workers, may take longer to address.

Healthcare (Bas-Saint-Laurent/Gaspésie/Côte-Nord Regions, Mid-size Centres Saskatchewan Parents of Children under 12, Okanagan Region Home Renters, Edmonton Tested Positive for COVID-19, Central and Southern Quebec)

Five groups discussed the subject of healthcare in their region. While several participants expressed positive views about the standard of care they typically receive, a significant number cited a widespread lack of family doctors in their area as a major concern. In addition, many in rural communities reported difficulty finding specialists in their areas, often forcing them to travel long distances to undergo certain treatments or procedures.

Regionally, participants in both groups from Quebec as well as those in Saskatchewan spoke highly regarding the quality of care they typically received, with most feeling the system in their area was currently working quite well. The group in Edmonton were more mixed, with some feeling that while under 'normal' circumstances the system operated relatively efficiently it had experienced a great deal of strain due to the COVID-19 pandemic and had since been unable to properly meet the demand of patients. Only those in the Okanagan spoke particularly negatively about their health care system, feeling there were very few options for family doctors in many communities and, in some cases, needing to travel to the Greater Vancouver Area (GVA) to consult with specialists. While most other groups felt only minor changes, such as greater accessibility and increased mental health services, were needed to improve their healthcare system, many participants in the Okanagan group called for a major overhaul.

Asked directly to identify the most pressing challenges for healthcare in their community (apart from the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic) participants pointed to a number of common issues, including accessibility, a backlog of delayed/cancelled appointments and procedures resulting from the pandemic, overworked healthcare professionals, a lack of healthcare workers in remote communities, high costs for certain procedures and medications, limited mental health resources, and ongoing visitor restrictions in hospitals stemming from the pandemic.

Asked if they had recently heard about any announcements or initiatives from the federal government related to healthcare, very few participants could recall anything. Discussing federal transfer payments, most participants thought greater investments in healthcare were needed from the federal government and felt the amount allocated to healthcare transfers should be increased. Questioned as to whether the federal government should attach conditions to increased transfer payments (such as stipulating that the money be allocated to specific priorities like mental health services, doctor shortages, or long-term care reforms) most participants were in favour of this approach, believing it would go a long way towards addressing key priorities, and ensuring greater consistency in care across the country, especially in rural areas. Among the smaller number of participants who felt that no conditions should be attached, the general sentiment was that healthcare spending decisions should

be left to the discretion of provincial/territorial governments and that federal directives could potentially hinder the ability of these governments to meet the specific needs of their respective populations.

Prompted to consider which specific healthcare issues they would like to see prioritized if the federal government were to add conditions to increased transfer payments, participants identified areas such as the construction of more healthcare facilities, training and hiring more doctors and nurses, incentivizing healthcare workers to practice in rural and Northern communities, further investments into long-term care, and an increased focus on mental health. Asked specifically about mental health treatment, almost all participants felt increased funding for this area should be prioritized. Many were of the view that Canadians across the country currently lacked sufficient access to therapy or medication, and that a continued stigma regarding mental health concerns prevented many from seeking out proper care.

Housing and Home Renting (Durham Region Parents of Children under 12, Bas-Saint-Laurent/Gaspésie/Côte-Nord Regions, Mid-size Centres Saskatchewan Parents of Children under 12, Okanagan Region Home Renters, Hamilton and Niagara Region Post-Secondary Students, Edmonton Tested Positive for COVID-19, Winnipeg)

Seven groups discussed issues related to housing, specifically focusing on home renting. The number of participants identifying as renters varied greatly across the groups. All participants in the groups from the Okanagan and Hamilton and Niagara region were renters, as were most in Edmonton and roughly half in Winnipeg. By contrast, very few in the groups based in Quebec, Ontario's Durham region, and Saskatchewan were renters. The four groups with a larger number of renters were asked how challenging it was to find affordable rental accommodations in their respective areas. Most described it as very difficult, with some in the Okanagan group feeling it was next to impossible due to the limited rental options in their area. Those from Edmonton and Winnipeg also recalled experiencing considerable difficulties, citing increasing costs, high demand, and the generally poor condition of affordable rental units in their areas. In all groups, a number of participants felt it was especially difficult for those living on their own to find affordable housing options.

Asked whether the federal government had a role to play in regulating the cost of rent in Canada, more were in favour of this notion than opposed to it, however, a significant number remained unsure. For those in support of rental regulation, many felt it made sense for the Government of Canada to play a role on this issue, similar to action it would take to address other economic issues such as inflation. Others were of the opinion that affordable and safe housing was a fundamental human right, and that for this reason the federal government had a responsibility to ensure the availability of housing for its citizens. Discussing what regulatory actions the federal government could reasonably take towards ensuring affordable rental housing throughout Canada, participants in favour of federal intervention suggested measures such as further limiting annual rent increases, the implementation of 'rent caps', or limiting the number of properties an individual landlord could own. Among those more opposed to federal regulation of the rental market, there were concerns about the negative impacts such action could have on landlords, especially with regard to their freedom to utilize their properties

as they saw fit. A number of these participants felt it was important to consider the circumstances of landlords who depended on their rental income to get by and may periodically need to increase rents to cover costs related to rising inflation, interest rates, as well as repairs and maintenance of their properties.

Discussing whether the Government of Canada should provide subsidies or incentives to owners of rental housing in exchange for binding commitments to not raise rents, while some were in favour of this proposal, more were either uncertain or opposed to the idea. Of those in favour, some felt it was realistically achievable and may appeal to landlords who would otherwise be hesitant towards federal regulation. For those more skeptical regarding this proposal, some were concerned there would be relatively low uptake by landlords to 'opt-in' to such an agreement, feeling there was not enough incentive for them to do so. Others were concerned about subsidies being provided to landlords, whom they felt were already privileged by virtue of owning rental properties in the first place.

Focusing on another potential initiative, participants were asked whether the Government of Canada should pass legislation prohibiting landlords from raising rents beyond a certain rate. Participants were again mixed in their views. While some generally reacted more positively to this idea than the previous one, many had reservations about the viability of this proposal. Those in favour of a federal 'rental cap' felt such action was necessary to stop rents from continuing to rise at such a rapid rate, and that if left to the 'free market' landlords would naturally try to maximize their profits. A number of participants, while supportive of the initiative, felt that any cap on rent would have to be tailored to the local rental market in each individual city or region and would have to be frequently updated to account for additional factors such as inflation.

Among the significant number opposed to this proposal, many felt it could potentially be unfair to landlords, limiting their ability to profit off their properties and failing to account for costs related to renovations, property taxes, and general maintenance. Many were also concerned the implementation of such legislation could end up unintentionally decreasing the rental supply, with landlords no longer feeling it was financially worthwhile to rent out their properties.

Housing Affordability (Okanagan Region Home Renters, Hamilton and Niagara Region Post-Secondary Students, Edmonton Tested Positive for COVID-19, Winnipeg)

Participants in these four groups discussed housing affordability more generally. To begin, the groups were shown a number of potential federal housing initiatives and then asked to identify and discuss the ones they believed would be most effective in increasing housing affordability for Canadians. All initiatives received at least some level of support, with the First-Time Homebuyer Incentive and the Affordable Housing Innovation Fund generally viewed as potentially having the greatest impact. With respect to the First-Time Home Buyer Incentive, many felt this initiative would be helpful for first-time buyers, particularly younger Canadians, who were currently working full-time but struggling to save up a sufficient down-payment, especially in light of ever-increasing prices. Several also felt the Affordable Housing Innovation Fund could foster viable, longer-term solutions to housing issues in Canada, leveraging the creativity of individual Canadians to devise innovative housing strategies.

Among the other proposals, the Federal Lands Initiative was also viewed as a potentially effective strategy, with many seeing it as an intuitive way for the Government of Canada to aid in making housing more affordable, while also putting unused federal lands to good use. While additional rental construction financing and the National Housing Co-Investment Fund generally received a lower level of support among participants relative to other initiatives, many felt they could also potentially aid in addressing a number of housing challenges. Though receiving relatively little attention from participants, a few also spoke positively of the Housing Accelerator Fund, particularly regarding its stated goal of increasing density in major urban centres. Some participants expressed concern, however, that too much of a focus was being placed on creating housing solutions for larger cities and were worried this would lead to a lack of attention towards smaller cities and towns.

Indigenous Issues (Saskatchewan and Manitoba Indigenous Peoples)

The group comprised of Indigenous participants living on reserve discussed a range of issues specific to their local communities and Indigenous peoples across Canada more broadly. Asked to identify the most important sectors and industries on their reserve, a number of responses were provided including oil, hospitality and entertainment, and the cultivation and sale of cannabis.

Discussing what the Government of Canada could do to help spur economic development in their communities, participants offered three key suggestions: providing Indigenous communities the opportunity to purchase Crown land and/or land-use rights surrounding their reserve, fostering an open dialogue between individual Indigenous communities and the federal government to determine the specific needs of each reserve, and reducing perceived administrative burdens and barriers for starting new ventures.

Participants next shared what they felt to be the greatest concerns currently facing their reserves. Responses tended to focus on problems related to poverty, discrimination, and inter-generational trauma, such as addiction, poor mental health, and domestic abuse. More pointedly, however, participants identified a number of structural issues contributing to the existence and perpetuation of these problems, including insufficient healthcare services, a lack of supports for victims of abuse, high food costs and food insecurity, and a dearth of affordable housing. With respect to infrastructure projects on reserve that participants thought the Government of Canada should be assisting in funding, a core set of social priorities were identified, including housing, healthcare and treatment facilities, shelters for those experiencing domestic abuse, and multipurpose community/recreational/sports facilities, especially for youth.

Asked about Indigenous issues more broadly and where the Government of Canada should be focusing its attention, participants identified a number of key priorities. These included greater efforts towards reconciliation, the provision of clean drinking water to all Indigenous communities, addressing food scarcity and exorbitant prices, a greater focus on educational equality relative to the rest of Canada, and an emphasis on developing community-based healthcare options, allowing those requiring treatment to remain on-reserve.

No participants felt the Government of Canada was focusing enough attention on Indigenous issues at present. It was believed by some that Indigenous issues and voices were rarely prioritized and that many actions taken by the federal government to address Indigenous concerns had little tangible impact on their communities. Asked if the Government of Canada had done anything particularly well as of late related to Indigenous issues, very few participants felt that it had. Few could recall any recent actions taken by the Government of Canada specifically towards addressing reconciliation. Related to this, a number felt that while attention was often devoted to Indigenous issues when they were making headlines, tangible actions were rarely taken to address the root causes of these problems, including the historical relationship between the Government of Canada and Indigenous peoples. Describing what they would expect to see from a federal government serious about addressing reconciliation, a number of actions were suggested. These included a more all-encompassing effort towards addressing the numerous perceived historical injustices towards Indigenous peoples, continued federal participation at the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) Special Chiefs Assembly, greater representation of Indigenous peoples at all levels of elected government, and the removal of existing barriers currently limiting the extent to which Indigenous peoples can determine their own affairs.

Asked whether they were aware of a federal court case related to the compensation of Indigenous children who had been harmed by historical federal child and family services (CFS) policies, a few participants had heard some details, however, many were unfamiliar with the specifics of the case. While some participants were happy to see compensation provided for those who had suffered from past CFS policies, many were concerned there would be conditions attached to how this money could be utilized by the recipients. In addition, it was reiterated by some that in addition to financial compensation there needed to be a greater focus on holistic healing, including on-reserve treatment options and ways to keep those seeking care in the same community as their loved ones.

Participants were also asked whether they were aware of a recent agreement between the Government of Canada and the Cowessess First Nation related to support for child and family services. While a few had heard something about an understanding being reached, no participants were aware of any specific details. It was clarified that as part of a recent agreement the Government of Canada would invest \$38.7 million over the next two years to support the Cowessess First Nation in the implementation of its own child and family services system. While a number of participants supported greater Indigenous self-determination in this area, many felt the transition to an Indigenous-led system should be undertaken very gradually and with great care. It was strongly felt there needed to be a larger, Indigenous-led regulatory body that each individual system would be accountable to.

Focusing on issues related to clean drinking water, participants were asked if they had heard anything about efforts by the Government of Canada to lift long-term drinking water advisories on Indigenous reserves. While some recalled having seen headlines about this, few were aware of any specific actions the federal government had recently taken towards resolving this issue. Participants were provided information in the form of an infographic detailing recent efforts by the federal government to lift long-term drinking water advisories in Indigenous communities throughout Canada. Asked to rate the progress of the Government of Canada on this issue now that they had reviewed this information, most still felt that not enough progress had been made, and that this basic duty of the federal

government to its citizens would not be met until all Indigenous communities had clean drinking water.

Asked about the housing situation on their respective reserves, most participants identified this as a major concern. Adequate housing, they said, was in extremely short supply, leading to long waiting lists and overcrowding, which, some pointed out, had compounded the challenges posed by the pandemic, making it very difficult for individuals who had tested positive or otherwise felt unwell to find a place to safely self-isolate. The few participants who felt the housing situation on their reserves had improved as of late credited the creation of smaller 'bachelor pad' style homes in their communities as well as the hiring of on-reserve contractors to undertake the construction work.

Canadian Content (Durham Region Parents of Children under 12, Bas-Saint-Laurent/Gaspésie/Côte-Nord Regions, Mid-size Centres Saskatchewan Parents of Children under 12, Okanagan Region Home Renters, Sudbury Region Francophones, Central and Southern Quebec)

Six groups discussed the subject of Canadian content, specifically focusing on the Canadian television, film, and music industries. Asked what they initially thought of when they heard the phrase 'Canadian content', a number of responses were provided including Canadian television channels, Canadian-produced films and television series, Canadian artists and creators, and educational or cultural content focusing on Canadian history, culture, and heritage.

With respect to any preferences for Canadian content over productions emanating from other countries, participants were somewhat split. While some said they would be more likely to watch film and television content if they knew it was Canadian, others said the subject matter and content were more likely to determine their interest in watching a film or television series rather than where it was produced. Most participants, regardless of preference, said the quality of the production was ultimately the determining factor as to whether they would continue watching. Regarding music by Canadian artists, while some based their listening preferences primarily on genre and style, many in these groups felt they would be more likely to seek out and listen to content they knew to be Canadian. Many felt that the quality of Canadian music was high, as good as anywhere, and featured a diverse array of talented artists.

Focusing on the state of the Canadian television and film industry, participants were somewhat split as to whether they felt the sector was currently at risk, with slightly more believing it to be in relatively healthy shape than those more worried about the industry's future. Those who felt the Canadian film and television industry was at risk were most notably concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on production, finances, and employment.

Participants generally wanted to see the federal government support Canadian artists and creators, as well as protect Canadian content and stories. Across all groups, there was a consistently high level of support for these goals. A number of participants also felt there should be greater investment in Canadian creators and artists to ensure they had access to the resources and opportunities necessary to establish their careers in Canada rather than having to leave for other jurisdictions such as the

United States. Many also supported the idea of web giants making Canadian content more discoverable on their platforms. In addition, a slightly smaller number of participants felt more needed to be done to showcase Canadian content, particularly on larger digital platforms. Some participants also felt taking steps towards modernizing the rules governing online content was an important priority, given how rapidly the digital media landscape was changing.

Asked if they were aware of proposed federal legislation to amend the Broadcasting Act, otherwise known as Bill C-10, a few participants recalled seeing headlines concerning the Bill but none could provide any specific details. Discussing whether they felt the Government of Canada should play a role in regulating non-user generated content on major digital platforms such as Netflix and Spotify, most participants felt these decisions should primarily be left to the viewer/listener and that the federal government should not be responsible for regulating content for Canadian audiences.

Youth and Post-Secondary Issues (Hamilton and Niagara Region Post-Secondary Students)

The group comprised of post-secondary students from the Hamilton and Niagara region discussed issues related to post-secondary education in Canada as well as those impacting younger Canadians more generally.

Asked about where they typically receive their news, almost all participants mentioned social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat, and several mentioned Google news. Many also clarified that they would often look to trusted news sources and authoritative outlets, such as CBC and other national or international media of record, to obtain further details and verify the accuracy of any stories they initially encountered on social media that did not originate from or link to coverage.

In regards to sources of news and information specifically related to the COVID-19 pandemic, participants again described receiving the majority of their news first from social media and Google news, or through word of mouth from friends and family. Asked whether they typically sought out news related to COVID-19, most said that while they had in the past, they rarely did so at this stage of the pandemic. Very few reported regularly looking for information related to or originating from the federal government. Discussing whether they had recently seen any advertising from the Government of Canada, a number of participants mentioned having encountered communications from the federal government on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat, as well as more traditional media such as television and radio. In most cases, the content of these advertisements was primarily related to the pandemic, often specifically focusing on the ongoing vaccination campaign encouraging Canadians to get their third dose of the COVID-19 vaccine.

Very few participants felt the Government of Canada was actively making an effort to reach out to students or prioritizing youth when making decisions. It was thought by some that while the federal government was aware that students and young people had struggled throughout the pandemic, they did not understand the nature of the struggle, particularly in terms of mental health. Discussing ways the federal government could more effectively reach out to students and youth, many felt social media was key and that federal officials needed to do more to tailor their messaging and approach to each

individual platform. Several participants also felt the Government of Canada could work with colleges and universities more effectively to communicate important messages to young people.

Asked what the most important issues were to them personally that the Government of Canada should be focusing on, participants identified a number of key themes, including housing affordability, high food prices, the need for increased wages due to rising inflation, and lowering costs related to post-secondary education. To further explore priorities, participants were shown a list of potential initiatives geared towards assisting students/youth and were asked to select any that stood out to them as particularly promising. All participants felt the federal government should work to permanently eliminate federal interest on Canada Student Loans and Canada Apprentice Loans, with several describing anxiety associated with this debt and the difficulty of paying it off. Participants also reacted positively to proposals related to pausing repayments of federal student loans for parents of young children and increasing the repayment assistance threshold. It was felt these could be helpful initiatives, though far less so than measures to reduce large educational debt in the first place. Almost all participants were in support of continuing to scale up youth and student skills as well as providing a wider array of youth employment programming initiatives. Most were also in favour of the creation of a new stream of the Youth Employment and Skills Strategy for Canadians with disabilities and felt this group of young Canadians deserved a better chance than they were currently being given to fulfil their potential, participate in the workforce, and contribute to the Canadian economy.

Discussing additional actions the Government of Canada could take to support students and youth with respect to education, a number of participants felt more could be done to support those enrolled in colleges and universities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many were frustrated at having to pay full tuition and fees for what they felt to be a limited academic experience due to the lack of in-person classes and on-campus activities. In addition, some were also concerned about entering the labour market after graduation, feeling that as 'COVID-19' students, prospective employers may feel their education and skills would be less developed than those who enjoyed a more 'normal' post-secondary experience.

Official Language Minority Communities (Sudbury Region Francophones)

A discussion on the topic of official language minority communities was held among Francophones residing in the Sudbury region in Ontario. Participants were concerned about the state of the French language in Sudbury, more specifically regarding the ability to pass on the language, culture, and heritage to future generations. Many felt it was a particular challenge for youth with French-speaking parents to maintain their language skills in communities where English is the dominant language on a day-to-day basis, especially among many of their peers. It was felt this was a challenge for youth within their homes as well as in schools and various social activities.

When asked about specific challenges facing Francophones living in the region, participants focused on three areas in particular: obtaining child care services in French, accessing French-language media content, and transmitting the French language and culture to the next generation.

Many felt the Government of Canada could be doing more to protect the French language in communities like their own. A number of potential actions were mentioned, including ensuring the presence of more French programming and content in the media, enabling community groups to offer more programs and activities in French, promoting the speaking of French within the Francophone school system, and increasing opportunities for those interested in undertaking educational studies in French at the primary, secondary, and post-secondary level. Some also suggested more should be done to attract a greater number of Francophone workers to their local community.

Mobile Phones (Winnipeg)

Issues pertaining to mobile phones and the cost of cell phone plans in Canada were discussed among participants in the group from Winnipeg. Many participants remarked upon the rising costs associated with cellular phones, including the high cost of voice and data plans, which they felt were becoming increasingly unaffordable for the average Canadian. While some were attempting to manage their costs by bundling services for family members under one bill, for example, the general view was that costs would continue to increase over the next few years.

Participants were aware of some actions the Government of Canada had taken to reduce the cost of cell phone plans, including reducing costs and restrictions for customers wishing to cancel their contract or shift from one provider to another as well as ensuring that mobile devices could be unlocked free of charge, upon request. At the same time, additional suggestions were provided in terms of what more the federal government could do to help with rising cell phone bills, such as ensuring that all telecom carriers offer a basic, low cost plan as a standard option, encouraging greater competition within the telecom sector, and taking action against what some perceived to be 'price-fixing' among major Canadian telecommunications corporations.

Local Issues (Nunavut)

Participants in the group from Nunavut discussed a number of issues specifically relevant to their region and local communities. To begin, participants were asked if they had been following the issue related to water contamination in Iqaluit. Most were aware of the issue, with some saying it had been a long-standing concern facing the community, dating back to the latter half of 2021. While some were under the impression that the issue had been resolved in recent months, others had heard that the community's water supply had once again become contaminated. Several recalled the presence of Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) personnel as well as the provision of federal government supplies and financial assistance towards resolving the issue. A few participants felt there should have been a greater effort by public officials to work with members of the community, including Inuit elders, who, it was felt could have provided useful advice, especially regarding operating in the extreme cold weather frequently experienced in the region.

Asked what additional steps the Government of Canada could take to assist in providing a long-term solution to clean drinking water issues in Iqaluit and the region more generally, a number of responses were provided. These included working with the municipal and territorial governments to construct a

new water treatment facility in the community, greater work towards resolving drinking water issues throughout the North as well as the rest of Canada, and infrastructure upgrades throughout the region in order to prevent future issues from emerging in other Indigenous communities.

Discussing housing in the region, all participants felt there were serious issues concerning the availability of affordable dwellings in Iqaluit as well as a large number of other Northern communities. This perceived lack of housing in the territory was felt to disproportionately affect Inuit families and those originally from the area compared to individuals recruited to Nunavut to work for private companies. All participants felt more needed to be done by the federal government to provide affordable housing options for those living in the North. Some were of the opinion that a housing crisis had existed since the inception of the territory and had only worsened in the decades that followed. It was believed there needed to be a greater emphasis on 'grassroots' solutions to the housing situation, including the greater incorporation of Inuk voices in the process.

Most participants felt that mental health problems represented a serious and significant issue in many Northern communities. Asked to identify the largest challenges contributing to this issue, participants mentioned a number of factors such as a lack of mental health services, stigma around receiving treatment, and poor living standards which it was felt only served to exacerbate existing mental health issues among many individuals. Most felt that mental health challenges among youth, in particular, constituted an especially widespread and difficult problem in the territory. Many felt a lack of extracurricular activities for youth, such as organized sports, cultural education, arts and music classes, and other programming, was a major contributing factor, hindering social opportunities, goal-setting, confidence, and the development of practical skills among young people.

Most participants felt that services and care for seniors in Nunavut were also significantly lacking. A number of participants thought many communities, including Iqaluit, faced accessibility issues, with many buildings built above ground and only reachable by stairway, making them difficult for those with mobility issues to access. It was also felt that in-community care was essential for protecting both the physical and mental wellbeing of elders, and that the ability to interact with loved ones was an important component of the healing process. Related to this, several participants alluded to the situation of an elder from Coral Harbour who had travelled to Ottawa for treatment and was now facing difficulty returning to their local community. Many thought the transportation of elders away from their communities was not only having a negative impact on elders but on their loved ones, as well, who experienced guilt and anxiety for being unable to provide adequate care. Most participants felt strongly that more needed to be done to keep elders in their communities whenever possible.

Local Issues (Prince Edward Island)

Participants in the group from Prince Edward Island (PEI) discussed a number of issues specific to the province, including those related to the United States denying entry of shipments of PEI potatoes, the hiring of PEI nurses by Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC), and immigration within the province.

To begin, participants were asked if they had seen, read, or heard anything about recent developments related to the trade of PEI potatoes. All were at least somewhat aware of an issue related to a the

United States temporarily denying entry of shipments of PEI potatoes due to the discovery of potato wart in some potato crops within the province. Most felt the Government of Canada had an important role to play in resolving this issue and resuming potato exports from PEI to the United States. Some thought the federal government needed to be firmer in its negotiations with U.S. counterparts and put greater effort into finding a solution. A few mentioned having heard the initial trade suspension had been 'self-imposed', with some believing that the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) had suspended potato exports in the first place. Some were critical of these actions by the U.S. and thought it had been unnecessarily 'heavy-handed' given the perceived low health risk of potato wart. While no participants reported being personally affected by this issue, many felt it could potentially have numerous negative economic consequences for the province, given the status of PEI potatoes as a major provincial export, and the economic damage already incurred by the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in lost income to vital sectors such as the tourism industry.

Discussing the CFIA's role more generally, most felt the agency was of critical importance, particularly in terms of ensuring public health and the safety of food products consumed by Canadians as well as international trade partners. It was believed the maintenance of high food-safety standards in Canadian exports was crucial in protecting Canada's international reputation as a safe exporter. Asked how they felt the CFIA was performing in terms of fulfilling its mandate, participants were largely split on this issue with roughly an equal number of individuals feeling the CFIA was doing a good job as those who felt performance had been poor. Some thought that, while frustrating at times, the CFIA was upholding its responsibility to the Canadian people and protecting the international reputation of Canadian exports by identifying and taking action regarding issues such as potato wart. Others, however, were of the view that the initial potato wart issue had been minimal and primarily limited to only a few potato fields. As such, they felt this matter had been blown somewhat out of proportion and that the CFIA should have worked harder to reassure U.S. trade counterparts regarding the safety of PEI potatoes and promote confidence in the thoroughness of Canadian food safety standards and regulations.

Very few had heard about Government of Canada business risk management (BRM) programs, including the AgriStability initiative. Asked, more specifically, if they were aware of a \$28-million plan from the federal government to assist PEI farmers affected by the trade suspension of potatoes to the United States, many participants had heard about this program, though few could recount any specific details. Most participants thought these financial supports would likely have a positive effect on helping PEI farmers and keeping their businesses viable in the short-term. Some, however, were skeptical that \$28 million would be enough to offset the potential financial losses incurred by potato farmers, and felt additional funding may need to be allocated. Discussing what they felt would be the long-term impact of this situation on the potato industry on PEI, many felt the 'PEI potatoes' brand would be significantly damaged. From an economic perspective, some were also concerned about the province potentially losing what they felt to be its competitive advantage in the sector.

Discussing the recent announcement on February 8th, 2022 that the United States would be allowing the resumption of shipments of PEI potatoes to the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico, almost all participants had heard about this development, with many feeling this was great news for the province and its farmers. While a small number felt this represented something of a 'double standard' in that the

potatoes were being accepted in Puerto Rico but not the U.S. mainland, most felt this decision was also related to increased demand for food stuffs in Puerto Rico. Some felt that potato wart, seen by most as primarily an aesthetic issue, would be of less concern relative to the nutritional value these potatoes could provide to the citizens of Puerto Rico. Most believed the CFIA likely played a role in accomplishing this partial reopening of trade, feeling this announcement represented a 'win' for both Canada and the United States and was a positive step towards fully resuming the trade of PEI potatoes.

Participants were also asked whether they had seen, read, or heard anything recently about Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC). Unprompted, several participants mentioned hearing about VAC hiring away a number of nurses who had previously been working for Health PEI, which some felt had caused a nursing shortage in the province, with the remaining nursing staff unable to meet the current demand of PEI residents. Asked specifically about the nursing issue, many felt that while VAC hiring these nurses may have negatively impacted the provincial health system, the switch may have been a beneficial one for nurses burnt out after working through almost two years of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some suspected that many of these nurses may have actively sought out this temporary change. Rather than finding fault with the nurses, however, many believed provincial officials needed to take a closer look at why nurses were leaving Health PEI as well as potential actions the provincial government could take to improve working conditions for nurses to avoid further departures.

Participants also discussed whether they had recently seen, read, or heard anything about immigration specifically relating to PEI. While few had heard any specific details, it was generally felt that immigration to PEI had recently increased. To some, this was both a positive and negative development that might benefit the economy in some areas, such as the workforce, while creating challenges in others, such as increasing the demand for and cost of housing. Speaking on immigration more broadly, a number of participants recalled hearing about recent delays for applicants seeking to obtain permanent residency or Canadian citizenship, though few could recall any specific details. A few had also heard about delays in processing family reunifications due to a 'backlog' of applications built up over the course of the pandemic. Generally, it was felt by many that the process for obtaining permanent residency or Canadian citizenship was quite onerous for applicants.

MORE INFORMATION

The Strategic Counsel
Contract number: 35035-182346/001/CY
Contract award date: December 16, 2021
Contract value: \$2,428,991.50
