



Government  
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# Continuous Qualitative Data Collection of Canadians' Views – November 2021

## Executive Summary

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For more information on this report, please email [por-rop@pco-bcp.ca](mailto: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 November 4<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup>, 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. Related to COVID-19, topics explored included what Canadians were hearing about the Government of Canada in the news, including their views on the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) and the Government of Canada's approach to child care, their outlook on COVID-19, including perspectives on the federal government's performance throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, thoughts on the extent of the spread of COVID-19 in coming months, vaccinations for children, testing requirements for travel, and travel restrictions resulting from the Omicron variant. Additionally, certain subgroups were also asked for their views on Health Canada mask messaging. Participants residing in the Greater Vancouver Area (South of the Fraser River) and those in small and rural centres across Atlantic Canada discussed their views on two advertisements aimed at encouraging compliance to public health guidelines.

In addition to the pandemic, non-COVID-19 related discussions were undertaken on a range of topics including the Speech from the Throne and the priorities that it outlined, the federal government's approach to Indigenous issues in light of the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal ruling, their understanding of inflation and its impact on their lives, local issues in Rural Quebec and Atlantic Canada, and the regulation of the telecommunications sector by the Government of Canada. Additionally, the two groups held in the Greater Vancouver Area were asked about current issues regarding opioids.

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, seniors over the age of 55, and Indigenous people.

### Detailed approach

- 12 focus groups across various regions in Canada.
- Six groups were conducted with the general population in rural Quebec, major centres Ontario, Manitoba and Saskatchewan, the Greater Vancouver Area north of the Fraser River, the Greater Vancouver Area south of the Fraser River and small/rural centres in Atlantic Canada.
- The other six groups were conducted with key subgroups including:

- Parents of children under 12 residing in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), Calgary and Edmonton and the Greater Montreal Area (GMA).
- Seniors over the age of 55 residing in Nova Scotia and mid-size centres Quebec; and
- Indigenous people residing across the Atlantic Canada region.
- Groups 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, 78 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 Toronto Area (GTA)	1	English	Nov. 4	6:00-8:00 pm	Parents of children under 12	7
Nova Scotia	2	English	Nov. 9	5:00-7:00 pm	Seniors, aged 55+	7
Rural Quebec	3	French	Nov. 10	6:00-8:00 pm	General Population	8
Calgary & Edmonton	4	English	Nov. 16	8:00-10:00 pm	Parents of children under 12	8
Greater Montreal Area (GMA)	5	French	Nov. 17	6:00-8:00 pm	Parents of children under 12	5
Atlantic Canada	6	English	Nov. 18	5:00-7:00 pm	Indigenous Peoples	5
Major Centres Ontario	7	English	Nov. 23	6:00-8:00 pm	General Population	7
Manitoba and Saskatchewan	8	English	Nov. 23	7:00-9:00 pm	General Population	7
Greater Vancouver Area North of Fraser River	9	English	Nov. 24	9:00-11:00 pm	General Population	5
Mid-size Centres Quebec	10	French	Nov. 25	6:00-8:00 pm	Seniors, aged 55+	5
Greater Vancouver Area South of Fraser River	11	English	Nov. 29	9:00-11:00 pm	General Population	7
Rural Centres Atlantic Canada	12	English	Nov. 30	5:00-7:00 pm	General Population	7
<b>Total number of participants</b>						<b>78</b>

# Key Findings

## Part I: COVID-19 Related Findings

### **Government of Canada in the News (All Locations)**

Among issues and activities related to the federal government in the month of November, those pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic were top of mind across all groups. Participants recalled a number of announcements and initiatives related to the federal government's ongoing management of the pandemic. These included the decision by Health Canada to approve vaccinations for children ages 5-11, the approval and planned roll out of COVID-19 booster shots, the re-opening of the Canada-U.S. land border, and (in later groups) the emergence of the Omicron variant.

In addition to the pandemic, participants mentioned issues related to the Government of Canada's activities on the international stage. These included Canada's participation in the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP 26) as well as the North American Leaders' Summit held in the middle of month in Washington, D.C., between Canada, the United States, and Mexico.

On the domestic front, participants spoke about discussions regarding raising of the flag back to full-mast at federal buildings prior to Remembrance Day, the federal government's response to the extreme flooding in British Columbia, the installation of a new federal Cabinet, and the delivery of the Speech from the Throne during the last week of November, signaling a new session of Parliament.

### **United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) (GTA Parents with Children Under 12, Nova Scotia Seniors, Rural Quebec)**

Most of the participants in these groups were aware that the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) conference had been taking place, even if they were not particularly familiar with the details. Participants generally supported the conference and its overarching goals of reducing global emissions and curbing the effects of climate change. Asked what specifics they could recall in terms of what the Government of Canada was proposing, participants highlighted the pledged to have all new Canadian automobiles be zero-emission vehicles (ZEVs) by 2035, the commitment by Canada to reduce overall greenhouse gas emissions, and calls by Canada for a price on pollution that would cover the majority of the planet's greenhouse gas emissions.

### **Federal-Provincial Child Care Initiatives (Major Centres Ontario, Manitoba and Saskatchewan, Mid-Size Centres Quebec Seniors)**

Many in these groups were aware of the federal government's child care initiatives, having heard that federal, provincial, and territorial governments had been collaborating to reach child care agreements in recent months. Some were also aware of the target to reduce child care costs to \$10 per child, per day on average.

There was mixed awareness among participants in these groups regarding the status of child care agreements between the Government of Canada and their respective provinces. Some participants in the provinces where new agreements had been reached (Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Quebec) were aware of this, while others were uncertain of the status. Those in Ontario were under the impression that the two levels of government were in negotiation but were uncertain whether any deal had been reached.

Almost all participants, even those for whom child care was not a personally relevant issue, agreed that affordable child care was important. Many felt that making child care more affordable was an economic necessity, especially for young families who needed two incomes to get by. Lowering the cost of child care was viewed as key to a better social and economic future for Canadians. Across all groups, a few participants questioned how \$10-a-day child care would be funded, expressing concern about the costs associated with what they otherwise felt was a worthy initiative.

### **B.C. Floods (GVA North of Fraser River, GVA South of Fraser River)**

All participants in the two British Columbia groups were aware of the flooding that had taken place in the southwestern part of the province and the large-scale damage these floods had caused to several communities. While a few participants were unaware of specific actions taken by the federal government in response to the extreme flooding, several had heard that the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) had been deployed to assist with the rescue and relief effort, and that the Government of Canada had worked with its U.S. counterparts to allow stranded Canadians to temporarily cross the Canada-U.S. border to return home or get essential supplies, such as groceries or fuel, from unaffected U.S. border towns.

Participants in both groups had expected support from the federal government to be forthcoming, given the scale of the disaster, and were pleased to see CAF personnel aiding in the relief effort. Feelings were mixed, however, as to whether the level of support from the Government of Canada had been adequate. Criticism focused on a belief that the response could have been stronger and more urgent. At the same time, some participants commented that the federal response was predicated on a formal request being made by the provincial government for aid, and that a potential delay in requesting aid may have been a factor in what was perceived to be a slow response.

When asked what additional supports the Government of Canada could provide to aid in the recovery effort, several recommendations were made, including lengthening the stay of the CAF, offering further resources and financial supports to flood-ravaged communities, supporting efforts to quickly rebuild the infrastructure and farmlands destroyed by the floods, and keeping grocery store shelves stocked in order to prevent panic buying. Other suggestions included the need for greater education around climate change, temporary aid to farm workers displaced by the floods, and further financial supports to assist individuals and homeowners affected by the flood.

**COVID-19 Outlook (GTA Parents with Children Under 12, Nova Scotia Seniors, Rural Quebec, Calgary and Edmonton Parents with Children Under 12, GMA Parents with Children Under 12, Atlantic Canada Indigenous Peoples, Major Centres Ontario, Manitoba and Saskatchewan, Mid-size Centres Quebec Seniors, GVA South of Fraser River, Rural Centres Atlantic Canada)**

All groups held in November discussed various aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a general trend across groups, attitudes towards the pandemic shifted with the emergence of the Omicron variant in late-November, with groups held prior to this development relatively optimistic regarding the outlook of the pandemic and those taking place after considerably more pessimistic.

**Evaluating the Government of Canada's Performance (GTA Parents with Children Under 12, Nova Scotia Seniors, Rural Quebec)**

To begin, participants were asked to recall anything that they felt the Government of Canada had done particularly well during the pandemic. This question prompted a wide number of responses, including the decision to close Canada's borders early in the pandemic, the provision of financial supports such as the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) and Canada Recovery Benefit (CRB), the efficient rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine, the consistent communication from public officials, and the decision to mandate that all federal employees be fully vaccinated. Many felt that the Government of Canada had done the best that it could in unprecedented circumstances, adapting its response as the pandemic evolved.

Following this, participants were next asked to recall any things they felt the Government of Canada could have done better in its response to the pandemic. Once again, a variety of responses were put forward. Some felt that travel restrictions could have been put in place even earlier, and that Canada should have been more prepared with personal protective equipment (PPE) materials and domestic vaccine production capability. Some expressed frustration regarding continued travel-related measures, such as the continued requirement for all travelers to provide a negative test result when crossing the border. A number of participants also indicated that they would have liked to see the Government of Canada encourage a more unified national response, given the many varying strategies utilized by the provinces and territories to combat the pandemic.

Asked to evaluate whether the federal government's response at present was better, worse, or about the same compared to the early stages of the pandemic, responses varied. Among participants who felt the federal response was better at present than at the start of the pandemic, it was felt that guidance from experts and government officials had improved, as they now had time to learn and adapt their responses to the changing science surrounding COVID-19. For those feeling the Government of Canada's response had worsened, a general lack of urgency was cited, with some adding that they believed the federal government to currently be 'stuck' in its handling of the pandemic and uncertain of what to do next. Some also felt that the federal government was not doing enough at present to address the economic toll of the pandemic and revitalize the economy. For those who generally felt that the Government of Canada's response to the pandemic had remained the same throughout, the prevailing sentiment was that the federal government had been relatively steady in its ability to provide leadership and respond to the pandemic as it evolved.

**COVID-19 Forecast (GTA Parents with Children Under 12, Nova Scotia Seniors, Rural Quebec, Calgary and Edmonton Parents with Children Under 12, GMA Parents with Children Under 12, Atlantic Canada Indigenous Peoples, Major Centres Ontario, Manitoba and Saskatchewan, Mid-sized Centres Quebec Seniors)**

Participants in these nine groups were asked for their opinions about where they believed the COVID-19 pandemic was headed, and specifically whether they believed the worst of the pandemic was now behind us. While there were a larger overall number of individuals across the groups who felt that the worst of the pandemic had passed, several expressed concern that the pandemic may yet take another negative turn in the months to come. Several were unsure about where the pandemic might be headed, citing how unpredictable it had been so far. Others added that while the medical aspects of the pandemic might improve, the lasting economic and mental health challenges would likely continue to be felt in a major way.

Among those who felt that the worst of the pandemic was over, several reasons were provided. The primary source of encouragement for most was the introduction of the vaccines, which they felt now provided a layer of protection that could potentially mitigate more serious outcomes for those who contracted the virus. The expected approval by Health Canada of vaccinations for children 5-11, as well as the ability to perform rapid testing and provide more effective contact tracing, were also seen as reasons for optimism. Despite this, several participants added that while they believed that the worst of the pandemic was over, they also felt that COVID-19 would continue to persist, even if in a reduced fashion, for a long time to come.

For participants who felt that the worst might still be yet to come regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, a variety of concerns were mentioned. Chief among these were the remaining unvaccinated portion of Canada's population, who it was felt would continue to contribute to the development and spread of potentially dangerous variants. A few participants clarified their feelings, predicting the state of the pandemic would improve overall, but not for the unvaccinated. The potential for waning vaccine-effectiveness and more breakthrough cases was also mentioned as cause for concern, as was the worry that the medical system and health care workers might be nearing their limits and were likely facing burnout.

Participants were next asked to indicate whether they felt that COVID-19 would still be an issue a year from now. Across groups, virtually all participants felt that the virus would remain an issue in at least some form or another. The most commonly voiced feeling was that the virus would eventually become endemic and that Canadians would have to find a way to live with it going forward under a 'new normal' in which annual booster shots and seasonal increases were to be expected.

**Omicron Variant (GVA South of Fraser River, Rural Centres Atlantic Canada)**

Two groups, based out of the Greater Vancouver Area (south of the Fraser River) and small/rural centres in Atlantic Canada respectively, were held after the discovery of the Omicron variant in late November. As such, these groups engaged in further discussions about this new variant and its potential implications going forward.



When asked whether they were aware of this new variant, all participants indicated that they had heard at least something about it. Asked to recall any specifics that they had heard about this new strain, participants reported having heard that the variant had been discovered in southern Africa and had since been detected on other continents, such as Europe, along with a positive case being reported in Ottawa. Participants had also heard concerns that the variant might be able to evade the vaccine, putting fully vaccinated individuals at risk. In both groups, many indicated exhaustion with the pandemic and felt that the emergence of the Omicron variant was yet another obstacle towards a return to normalcy.

Participants were next asked if they were personally worried about the Omicron variant. Across both groups, the prevailing feeling was that there was not cause to worry just yet, as much was still unknown. Several individuals mentioned that we had dealt with dangerous variants before and that Omicron was unlikely to be the last. For those few participants who did indicate some worry, concerns included the well-being of their immunocompromised loved ones, as well as general worries that the public was beginning to show fatigue with the pandemic and might not follow safety protocols as vigilantly as they may have earlier in the pandemic. Following this, it was asked whether the Omicron variant had changed individual's perceptions about how long the pandemic would last. For most participants, the feeling was that the emergence of the Omicron variant had not tangibly altered their expectations surrounding the pandemic, as they had already believed the pandemic would continue to persist for a long time to come.

Next participants were asked if they had heard anything about the Government of Canada's response to the Omicron variant. While a few recalled that the Chief Public Health Officer of Canada had held a press conference about the variant, and that travel had been banned from several African nations, many were unable to recall any specific details about the federal response so far.

After being informed of the federal government's newly introduced travel restrictions to (at the time) seven South African nations, participants were asked for their initial reactions. Several participants expressed skepticism that the measures would work, given that the Omicron strain had already been detected in Canada, as well as the impression that the restrictions could be circumvented easily by travelers going to a third country first. Others felt differently, stating that there was some value in introducing these travel restrictions in that they may buy some time to better understand the threat posed by the variant. Several participants agreed that these measures were appropriate, at least in the short term.

In light of this new variant, participants in these two groups were also asked to discuss the question of COVID-19 booster shots and whether they should be offered to all Canadians or just those in higher risk categories. All participants believed that booster shots should eventually be made available to all Canadians. That said, most felt that in rolling out the booster shots the federal and provincial/territorial governments should follow the same procedures as the initial vaccination campaign, focusing on those at greater risk first and then gradually inviting more Canadians to receive their booster shot.

### **Vaccines for Children 5-11 (Calgary and Edmonton Parents with Children Under 12, GMA Parents with Children Under 12)**

In these two groups, discussions were held surrounding the anticipated approval by Health Canada of COVID-19 vaccines for children ages 5-11.

To begin these discussions, participants were made aware that the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine was, at the time, under review by Health Canada for approval for children ages 5-11. Participants were then asked whether they were planning on having their children vaccinated.

In each group, opinions on this issue were largely split, and in no group was there a single dominant opinion. Among those parents planning on getting their children vaccinated, several indicated that they either worked in health care or were confident enough in the health care system and the underlying science that they did not feel any apprehension about the vaccine. Some also indicated that they had left the decision up to their children.

For participants who indicated that they were not planning on getting their children vaccinated, at least right away, the perceived low risk of COVID-19 to children as well as feelings of general uncertainty around the safety of the vaccine were the primary drivers behind their decision. A few parents clarified that they were not against vaccines in general and had vaccinated their children throughout their lives but they wanted more time to evaluate the safety of the COVID-19 vaccine. It was also stated by a few individuals that if more restrictions were introduced on unvaccinated children that they might reconsider their position to ensure their children would still be able to enjoy things like travel and other public activities that might be open only to the vaccinated. As a follow-up, participants were asked if they had discussed the vaccines and getting vaccinated with their children. Several parents recalled having talked about vaccines with their children, with some doing so in greater detail while others only in a more general sense. No parents were adamantly against discussing this topic with their children.

For those hesitant about vaccinating their children, it was asked what factors were currently influencing their decision as well as what questions they would like to have answered in order to make an informed decision. A variety of responses were provided, including further clarification as to what the risks of COVID-19 to children truly were, whether unvaccinated children would face restrictions, how many shots or boosters they would need, and whether there were any potential dangerous side effects from the vaccine.

### **COVID-19 Travel Restrictions (Calgary and Edmonton Parents with Children Under 12, GMA Parents with Children Under 12, Atlantic Canada Indigenous Peoples)**

In three of the twelve groups held in November, discussions were held surrounding awareness and views regarding the existing requirements for travelers entering Canada.

To begin, participants were asked whether they were aware of any existing requirements for travelers entering into Canada, with a particular focus on any testing requirements that may be in place. Some reported being under the impression that all travelers needed to be fully vaccinated and provide a negative test result upon arrival into Canada. It had also been heard that fully-vaccinated travelers

would no longer need to quarantine upon arrival into Canada so long as they tested negative, and that rapid tests might soon be available to Canadian travelers, potentially making travel during the pandemic a lot more convenient. Several participants expressed uncertainty regarding existing travel requirements, feeling that they had been constantly changing throughout the pandemic. Among these participants there was some sense of frustration about these frequent changes to requirements and the uncertainty it caused.

After clarification was provided around the existing testing requirements (notably the need to provide a negative PCR test result within 72 hours of one's planned entry into Canada), participants were asked for their thoughts on whether these measures were appropriate. In all groups there was at least some level of opposition to these requirements, with many feeling like these put an undue burden on travelers, both financially and in the inconvenience of having to take these tests while traveling. For some, this was viewed as unfair; they felt that they had done their part by getting vaccinated and that these requirements should not apply to them. For those in favour of these requirements, it was felt that these measures provided an extra layer of protection from dangerous variants entering the country. It was also added that even asymptomatic, fully-vaccinated individuals could still carry and transmit the virus. Several participants expressed a desire for clearer and more consistent policies from the Government of Canada regarding travel restrictions and what to expect going forward, feeling that communication on this front had been somewhat confusing throughout the pandemic.

### **Health Canada Mask Messaging (Nova Scotia Seniors, Rural Quebec, Atlantic Canada Indigenous Peoples, Major Centres Ontario, Manitoba and Saskatchewan, GVA North of Fraser River, Mid-size Centres Quebec Seniors, GVA South of Fraser River, Rural Centres Atlantic Canada)**

Participants in nine of twelve groups engaged in an exercise where they evaluated messaging surrounding medical masks that might potentially be used by the Government of Canada in the future.

Four groups, including those made up of seniors over the age of 55 in Nova Scotia, Indigenous people from Atlantic Canada, seniors over the age of 55 from mid-sized centres in Quebec, and individuals from small/rural centres in Atlantic Canada, were shown the following message:

*Medical masks are recommended for:*

- *People who are at risk of more disease or outcomes from COVID-19; and*
- *People who are at a higher risk of exposure to COVID-19 because of their living situation.*

Asked for their initial reactions, most felt that this messaging made sense and was quite straightforward, reflecting the safety practices that they believed many Canadians were already engaging in. While no participants were in opposition to this statement, it was expressed that this messaging was coming quite late in the game and might be discouraging to those who had been wearing cloth masks this whole time. It was also felt that further clarification could be provided regarding which groups or situations were seen as particularly high risk.

Participants in these groups were next asked if this message made them think about the type of mask they should be wearing. Many indicated that they already wore medical masks exclusively, while a few

others in the groups indicated they would likely be switching to medical masks going forward. A small number of participants indicated they would likely continue to use their own risk calculations when deciding whether to use a medical or cloth mask.

Five other groups, including those hailing from rural Quebec, major centres in Ontario, Manitoba/Saskatchewan, and two groups from the Greater Vancouver Area, were shown a slightly different message:

*In general, while non-medical masks help prevent the spread of COVID-19, medical masks and respirators provide better protection*

Participants were encouraged to share their reactions to this message as well as indicate if they had been aware of this information already. Awareness of medical masks providing better protection was high across all groups, with most indicating they had been informed of this before. Several participants indicated that they felt this messaging reflected common-sense and that they had been aware since the early stages of the pandemic that not all masks offered the same level of protection.

Across the groups, a smaller number of participants had questions or concerns about the messaging. Some worried that differentiating between types of masks might cause further divisions, or that this message could cause a rush to buy medical masks and potentially cause shortages, while others felt that the messaging implied that masks were the key measure of protection - rather than the vaccine, which they felt was far more important.

Following this, participants were asked whether they felt it was important for the federal government to inform Canadians of this message. Across all groups, most felt that the messaging was useful and important to convey to the public, even if only as a reinforcement for existing behaviour. Some participants suggested improvements to the messaging, including greater clarity around what constituted a 'medical' mask, as well as whether this information would be better communicated by provincial or territorial health authorities rather than the federal government.

### **Health Canada Public Health Measures Ad Disaster Check (GVA South of Fraser River, Rural Centres Atlantic Canada)**

Two groups engaged in an activity where they evaluated a potential COVID-19 related advertisement currently being developed by the Government of Canada. These groups were both held following the emergence of the Omicron variant.

After viewing the advertisement twice, participants were asked for their initial reactions. Across both groups, participants expressed mixed feelings regarding the advertisement. Several individuals commented that they would likely scroll past the video if it popped up on their social media feeds, while others added that the advertisement was too fast-paced for them to absorb the information, though this was less of an issue after a second viewing. Many participants felt that the positive tone of the video, particularly considering the recent emergence of the Omicron variant, represented a disconnect from what most were actually feeling at the moment.

Asked if they understood the message behind the video, most indicated that they felt the purpose of the advertisement was to congratulate the public on their efforts so far and encourage them to continue following public health practices. It was felt that this message was primarily directed at younger generations. Asked if the advertisement had resonated with them, many expressed that it had not, describing the upbeat tone as difficult to relate to. A few participants felt that the advertisement was too lighthearted with respect to the pandemic at a time when many were feeling a great deal of frustration with how long it had already lasted.

## Part II: Other Issues

### **Speech from the Throne (GTA Parents with Children Under 12, Nova Scotia Seniors, Rural Quebec, Major Centres Ontario, Manitoba and Saskatchewan, GVA North of Fraser River, Mid-size Centres Quebec Seniors, GVA South of Fraser River, Rural Centres Atlantic Canada)**

The Speech from the Throne (SFT), delivered on November 23<sup>rd</sup>, was discussed in nine of the twelve groups held in November. Three groups (Greater Toronto Area Parents of Children under 12, Nova Scotia Seniors over the age of 55, and the group made up of participants from Rural Quebec) were held prior to the delivery of the Speech. All other groups were held either on or after the date the SFT had taken place.

### **Pre-Speech (GTA Parents with Children Under 12, Nova Scotia Seniors, Rural Quebec)**

Among those groups held prior to its delivery, awareness of the Speech from the Throne was quite low, with very few participants indicating they were aware the speech would soon be taking place. Asked if they understood what a Speech from the Throne was, most either did not know or had only a vague understanding.

After the purpose behind the Speech from the Throne was clarified, participants were asked to identify which initiatives or subject areas they expected to be included. Predictions put forward included initiatives focused on climate change, economic issues, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, affordable child care, Indigenous-focused issues, and investigating sexual misconduct reports within the Canadian Armed Forces.

Having shared their expectations, participants next were asked to discuss the priorities that they felt should be in the speech, even if they did not expect these subject areas to be covered. Suggestions included a greater focus on housing affordability, renewed efforts towards reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples, a national pharmacare program for all Canadians, retraining for the labour force of declining industries such as oil and gas, and further financial aid for lower income Canadian households.

**Post Speech (Major Centres Ontario, Manitoba and Saskatchewan, GVA North of Fraser River, Mid-Sized Centres Quebec Seniors, GVA South of Fraser River, Rural Centres Atlantic Canada)**

In the groups held on or after November 23<sup>rd</sup>, awareness of the Speech from the Throne was slightly higher, particularly among those groups held closer to the date of its delivery. That said, across all groups many participants indicated having little to no knowledge of the speech.

Among those aware that the Speech from the Throne had been delivered, participants were asked to recall anything that they had heard about the speech's content. A number of areas and initiatives were identified, including affordable child care, the federal government's plans to navigate the next stages of the pandemic, the federal response to recent natural disasters (such as the extreme flooding in British Columbia), and a pledge to reintroduce legislation banning conversion therapy throughout Canada. Those who had indicated awareness of the speech were next asked to share what they thought was the overarching focus of the Speech from the Throne. Across all groups, the prevailing sentiment was that the speech served as a reiteration of previous priorities and initiatives from the federal government and did not represent much of a policy shift.

Four of the groups (respectively from major centres in Ontario, Manitoba and Saskatchewan, the Greater Vancouver Area north of the Fraser River, and seniors over the age of 55 from mid-sized centres in Quebec) engaged in an exercise discussing the content of the Speech from the Throne as well as areas for improvement. As part of this activity participants were shown a number of priorities from the speech, including getting the pandemic under control, building an economy that works for all, taking action to fight climate change, creating more inclusive communities, fighting systemic discrimination, working towards reconciliation with Indigenous partners, and protecting Canadians from threats to their communities, society, and democracy.

After reviewing this information, participants were asked to identify any subjects missing from the speech that they felt should be included. Issues put forward included a greater focus on housing affordability, affordable post-secondary education, less expensive child care for Canadian families, increasing the minimum wage, foreign aid, measures to address the perceived labour shortage across the country, and economic policies to curb inflation and make the general cost of living in Canada more affordable.

The group based in Atlantic Canada engaged in a slightly different exercise, focusing on evaluating a list of initiatives from the Speech from the Throne and identifying which, if any, stood out as particularly important. The list shown to participants included: the Housing Accelerator Fund, a pledge to increase immigration and refugee levels while reducing wait times, capping/cutting oil and gas sector emissions, investing in public transit and zero emission vehicles, a mandatory buyback of banned assault-style weapons, a ban on conversion therapy, and the creation of a national monument to honour survivors of residential schools.

The climate-focused initiatives generally received the most praise from participants. Among the other actions listed, the Housing Accelerator Fund and increasing immigration/refugee levels were also identified as important priorities. Some questioned whether it might be too soon to create a monument honouring residential school survivors, feeling that this could be seen as insensitive.

### **Indigenous Issues (GTA Parents with Children Under 12, Nova Scotia Seniors, Calgary and Edmonton Parents with Children Under 12, GMA Parents with Children Under 12, Atlantic Canada Indigenous Peoples)**

In five of the twelve focus groups taking place in November, discussions were held regarding issues affecting Indigenous Peoples within Canada.

At the outset of these conversations, participants were asked to evaluate the importance of Indigenous issues relative to various other national priorities and the degree to which the federal government had given attention to these issues. Across the groups, almost all participants felt that Indigenous issues deserved far greater attention than they were currently receiving and that this represented an important priority for the Government of Canada going forward. Though it was acknowledged by some that the federal government had worked in recent years to address some of the issues facing Indigenous communities, many felt these actions were primarily symbolic and had not brought about much tangible progress.

During these conversations, several participants brought forward suggestions regarding Indigenous-focused issues that they felt the Government of Canada should devote additional resources to. These included providing additional resources towards promoting Indigenous histories and cultures, ensuring Indigenous perspectives were included in curriculums in Canadian schools, providing greater educational and employment opportunities for Indigenous communities, and bringing a renewed focus to upholding existing treaties between the federal government and Indigenous Peoples.

Asked whether they could recall any specific actions taken recently by the federal government in regards to Indigenous issues, participants were able to recall specific initiatives such as the Government of Canada increasing funding for excavating former residential school sites, the creation of a National Day of Truth and Reconciliation, and the ongoing work to address drinking water advisories on Indigenous reserves. Several participants, however, once again reiterated the opinion that not enough concrete action was currently being taken by the Government of Canada to raise the living standards of Indigenous communities.

Participants were next asked if they were aware of a federal court case related to compensation for Indigenous children who were harmed by child and family services policies. While some participants indicated awareness of this case, it was clarified for others that the Government of Canada had recently filed a notice of appeal of a decision by the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal to award \$40,000 to each child who had been apprehended or taken from their home or reserve at any point from Jan, 1 2006 to a date yet to be determined. Asked for their reactions, many questioned why the decision had been appealed in the first place, instead of paying the \$40,000 amount as soon as possible. Among many groups, participants expressed the opinion that \$40,000 per person was not enough and that financial compensation alone would not heal the inter-generational trauma that had been inflicted on Indigenous children. It was felt by many that a more all-encompassing solution was necessary.

Next, participants were asked to look ahead two or three years and think about what it would take for them to feel that the Government of Canada was on the right track when it came to tackling the issues facing Indigenous Peoples. Across the groups a variety of criteria were put forward that participants

felt could adequately determine whether progress was being made on these issues. These included actions such as improving the living conditions and infrastructure on reserves, expanding mental health services for all Indigenous communities, ensuring greater representation of Indigenous Peoples at all levels of government, and promoting a general policy and cultural shift towards greater sensitivity to Indigenous issues.

While many participants felt that these problems would take a great deal of time and effort to solve, most believed there were ways to successfully address the issues facing Indigenous Peoples and that the Government of Canada had an important role to play in this process.

**Inflation (GTA Parents with Children Under 12, Nova Scotia Seniors, Rural Quebec, Calgary and Edmonton Parents with Children Under 12, GMA Parents with Children Under 12, Atlantic Canada Indigenous Peoples, Major Centres Ontario, Manitoba and Saskatchewan, Mid-size Centres Quebec Seniors)**

Participants in nine of the twelve groups held in November discussed the topic of inflation and its potential impacts on the Canadian economy. Most indicated having some understanding of inflation, describing it as a persistent rise in prices across all sectors. Asked whether prices seemed to be noticeably higher at the moment, almost all participants felt this was the case.

Asked if they were worried about inflation, most indicated that they were at least somewhat concerned about the increasing cost of living and how it could affect them in the months and years to come, with several already noticing essential expenses such as groceries, fuel, and housing increasing at much higher rates than usual. Many parents in the focus groups were also anxious about the potential impact of persistent high inflation on the financial prospects of their children and future generations of Canadians. Those already retired or approaching retirement were also concerned, as significant price increases while their incomes remain fixed could vastly diminish their purchasing power during their retirement years.

When discussing whether inflation would affect their lives on a personal level, responses were mixed, though most felt that rising costs would have at least some impact on their quality of life in the near or long-term. Several participants mentioned that they would likely have to adjust their lifestyles by reducing expenditures, while vehicle owners, particularly those who drove frequently for work, were concerned about how rising fuel costs might impact their costs of doing business. The impact of increasing housing costs was also mentioned by several participants who underscored the challenges this could pose for future generations in attaining home ownership.

Asked to identify the cause of rising prices, in their opinion, many pointed to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, with the resulting supply-chain issues being seen as a key driver for prices going up. Several also mentioned the ongoing financial supports provided by the Government of Canada throughout the pandemic, believing this emergency spending had created a labour shortage combined with excess consumer demand. Overall, it was generally felt by most that the pandemic and related challenges had exacerbated existing economic challenges and created the conditions for a rise in inflation.



Aside from the pandemic, participants identified several other factors that they believed were contributing to the recent increase in inflation, including extreme weather events across the country disrupting regional economies, and large corporations increasing prices despite their perceived large profits throughout the pandemic. Some also felt that inflation is cyclical and that to some degree this inflationary period was to be expected.

Many believed that the Government of Canada could take some action to curb inflation rates, and several pointed to the historic practice of raising interest rates in periods of high inflation. That said, it was acknowledged that this action could also cause financial difficulties for many Canadian households. Reducing taxes, eliminating pandemic-related financial supports, and renewing a focus on enhancing Canada's domestic manufacturing capacity were also put forward as suggestions towards reducing the rate of inflation. Across all groups, many participants observed how several of the factors contributing to inflation were interrelated and thus felt that there were no easy solutions to this issue.

Informed that the Bank of Canada generally aims to keep inflation at a rate of 2% per year, most participants believed this was a reasonable target, though many expressed doubt that this would be achievable in the near future.

To prompt further discussion on this topic, particularly on balancing interest rates and the rate of inflation, participants were asked whether the Bank of Canada should try to keep inflation rates low, even if it meant that the rate of interest would go up. Participants reacted with mixed views. Many felt that raising interest rates was a risky prospect in that it could put many homeowners at risk of losing their homes, as well as potentially throwing the entire housing market into disarray. Several also believed, however, that raising interest rates was a necessary step and that the wider impacts of inflation needed to be taken into account rather than solely focusing on what raising interest rates might do to the housing market. Discussing the idea of a gradual rate increase over an extended period of time, most participants felt this was a reasonable compromise.

To conclude these conversations, participants engaged in a discussion regarding the key principles that should guide the Bank of Canada in making financial decisions. Many felt that keeping inflation low was the most pressing issue and therefore demanded the greatest amount of attention. Several also put forward the notion that the Bank of Canada should pursue policies to keep employment rates high, particularly given ongoing concerns about labour shortages. A few others commented that maximizing home ownership, whether by keeping interest rates low or via other means, should be the chief priority for the Bank of Canada as they believed this was the best path to long-term financial stability for Canadians.

### **Rural Issues (Rural Quebec, Rural Centres Atlantic Canada)**

Participants in two groups held during November discussed local issues with a particular focus on the challenges facing smaller communities and rural areas. To open the conversation, participants were asked for their thoughts about the level of attention being given by the Government of Canada to rural issues relative to those impacting urban areas. Most were of the view that the concerns of those

residing in urban areas were prioritized over those of smaller, rural communities. Several participants felt that federal policy and decisions often reflected a focus on areas with high population density and that, as such, large infrastructure projects and funding were more likely to be directed towards major urban centres.

While the general feeling across both groups was that rural issues deserved greater attention than they were currently being given, several participants acknowledged recent initiatives and projects by the federal government that had benefited their local communities. These included new athletic complexes, tourism attractions, additional funding for small-scale producers, and funding for a women's correctional centre on Prince Edward Island. It was felt by many that these projects would bring about additional jobs and tourism income for their communities.

Asked what the Government of Canada could do to help their local communities, several suggestions were offered, including funding for infrastructure improvements (e.g., schools and sidewalks), creation of new parks and local attractions, tax credits for families with young children, assistance to first-time homebuyers, expansion of mental health resources, and programs to support and promote the creation of small and mid-sized local businesses.

Participants were next asked about the cell phone service in their area, specifically in terms of connectivity and reliability. While several felt that the service they received was generally satisfactory, most acknowledged that inconsistent and unreliable service was an issue for them. A number of participants commented on the variable access to service in rural areas, noting that service may be good in one location (e.g., in town) and poor or non-existent as one moved a short distance away from the more populous areas.

Participants in these groups were also asked how they typically received their local news. This generated a wide range of responses. While local radio and television stations were commonly mentioned, along with local newspapers, participants also indicated some reliance on social media (e.g., Facebook) to follow information and news from the local municipality and/or local Facebook groups.

### **Opioids (GVA North of Fraser River, GVA South of Fraser River)**

The two groups comprised of participants based in the Greater Vancouver Area discussed the issue of opioids and their thoughts about the rising number of opioid-related deaths being reported throughout the province. Most had heard about this issue in the news and were of the view that opioids were becoming a larger issue within British Columbia.

Asked who they felt was most affected by this issue, participants were largely of the belief that opioid addiction affects people of varying socio-economic statuses and backgrounds. They felt that while homeless people and more marginalized or vulnerable groups tended to be more visible, the impacts of the opioid crisis were felt across a larger swath of the population. Several did add, however, that they believed that homelessness and mental health issues were contributing factors. Others mentioned that opioid addictions might occur unintentionally, describing situations such as

recreational users spiralling into more serious addictive behaviour as well as those recovering from surgeries developing an addiction to the opioids they were prescribed for pain management.

Unprompted, several participants said that the issue of opioid addiction and overuse had increased in severity in recent years which they believed was connected to 'street drugs' increasingly being laced with dangerous opioids such as fentanyl. Many were of the opinion that the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and resultant isolation had exacerbated the issue. Several commented that action needed to be taken at all levels of government to address this problem and felt more emphasis should be placed on eliminating the toxic drug supply as well as educating Canadians (particularly younger generations) about the dangers of addiction.

In response to a more direct question about who or what they felt was primarily to blame for the increasing opioid issues within the province, participants reiterated some of their earlier views and identified other possible issues. These included overprescribing by physicians, pharmaceutical manufacturers producing and marketing unsafe products, a lack of mental health services, large quantities of dangerous opioids such as fentanyl being allowed into Canada, as well as issues such as homelessness putting vulnerable individuals into situations where opioid use was more prevalent.

Following this discussion, participants were shown a list of various factors that might be at the root of the problem and asked to select up to three that they felt were key. Options included doctors not prescribing properly, drug companies making unsafe products, gangs, a lack of policing, personal responsibility, and poor border control. Across both groups, several of these factors were pointed to as the primary cause of the opioid problem. Doctors not prescribing properly and drug companies making unsafe products were viewed by many as going hand-in-hand. Several others felt that gangs were a key contributor, in that they profited by selling dangerous drugs to those with addictive behaviours. Few felt that a lack of policing and border control were contributing factors. It was also stated by some that personal responsibility played a role, and that, regardless of the motive or rationale, putting a dangerous substance into one's body was a personal decision.

Asked what potential responses the Government of Canada could take to address this growing issue, several ideas were put forward, including expanding mental health resources, ensuring only fentanyl that is medically necessary enters the country, improving education about dangerous drugs, and providing greater policing and legislative action to counter the illicit drug trade.

The final part of the discussion focused on a recent plan by the City of Vancouver to gain approval from Health Canada to decriminalize small amounts of illicit drugs. Some were aware of the proposed initiative and reactions to this initiative were mixed. A few participants had heard the program in Vancouver would be physician-monitored, administered by a tap-card system, and would involve regular drug testing to ensure these individuals were not also seeking drugs from other sources. Some also expressed caution regarding the potential decriminalization of these substances, feeling that greater educational resources would need to be in place about the dangers of these drugs if they were to become more readily available. It was suggested that, in order to be optimally effective, the program should be expanded from the City of Vancouver to the entire Lower Mainland.

Asked whether they felt the Government of Canada should decriminalize the possession of illicit drugs for personal use, participants expressed a range of views. Some were supportive, while others had concerns, primarily revolving around the capacity of the health care system to manage an expected additional workload, especially given the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Asked if they felt that decriminalizing these illicit drugs would reduce the stigma faced by drug users and potentially encourage them to seek treatment, most participants believed that it would.

### **Telecommunications (Major Centres Ontario, Manitoba and Saskatchewan, GVA North of Fraser River, Mid-size Centres Quebec Seniors)**

In four of the twelve groups held in November participants discussed the subject of telecommunications.

To begin, participants were asked for their broad opinions on the state of the telecommunications sector within Canada. The most commonly expressed view across all groups was that, at present, the telecommunications landscape in Canada resembled an oligopoly, with a few large companies dominating the sector. It was also felt by several that this lack of competition was responsible for the perceived high costs of telecommunication services across Canada. Solutions proposed by participants to this issue included having the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) put stronger regulations in place to limit the prices these companies can charge as well as ensuring greater competition be allowed into the market.

The conversations next shifted to discussing the proposed merger between Rogers Communications and Shaw Communications. Awareness of this deal was mixed, with roughly an equal number of participants mentioning they were aware of the impending merger as those who were not. Among those already aware of the deal, there was a general sense of negativity towards the merger.

Questioned directly about whether they felt that it would be good or bad for consumers if this deal were to be approved, participants were mostly of the opinion that this merger would not benefit Canadians. Asked if the CRTC should accept or reject the deal, most felt that the deal should be rejected. Following this, participants were prompted to consider what conditions, if any, could be added to the deal that would make them more comfortable with seeing it be approved. Suggestions included setting price caps on services such as Internet, mobile phone service, and cable, the allowance for greater competition within the Canadian telecommunications market, and more equitable service across Canada, ensuring all Canadians received a consistent high quality of service. Several participants were adamant that there were no conditions that could be placed on this deal that would make it acceptable, feeling that this merger would bring the telecommunications sector that much closer to a complete monopoly.

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**MORE INFORMATION**

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