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Continuous Qualitative Data Collection of Canadians' Views – September 2020

Executive Summary

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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 September 2nd and 29th, 2020 in multiple locations across the country including Atlantic Canada, Quebec, Ontario, the Prairies, 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 focussed primarily on COVID-19, as the pandemic continued in Canada. The research explored a wide range of related issues in depth, including what Canadians were hearing about COVID-19 in the news, views on whether pandemic was under control in Canada, how their behaviours have evolved, as well as the intersection of COVID-19 and the economy, specifically in terms of federal government financial supports and the transition from CERB to EI. There were also discussions held among particular key subgroups of the population, such as parents, to explore how they were feeling about sending their children back to school.

In addition to the pandemic, non-COVID-19 related discussions broached other topics including the opioid crisis, Pharmacare, Indigenous issues, and the Speech from the Throne. Additionally, throughout the month, various creative concepts intended to promote getting the seasonal flu shot were shown to participants and parents specifically were shown a series of concepts that promoted childhood vaccines.

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 focussed on specific subgroups of the population including pregnant women /women expecting to become pregnant within the next year, parents of young children and school aged children, seniors (aged 55 and older), Indigenous peoples, and CERB recipients.

Detailed approach

- 12 focus groups across various regions in Canada.
- Three groups were conducted with the general population in major centres in Atlantic Canada, smaller centres in Quebec and the Lower Mainland.
- The other eight groups were conducted with key subgroups including:
 - Pregnant women, women expecting to become pregnant in within the next year and parents of newborn to 6 years in major centres in Ontario and major Francophone centres;
 - Parents of school aged children in major centres in Saskatchewan and mid-size centres in Ontario;
 - Indigenous peoples residing in Winnipeg or the National Capital Region (NCR); and
 - CERB recipients from the Greater Montreal Area (GMA) and Greater Toronto Area (GTA), and seniors from mid-size centres Quebec and major centres in Alberta.

- 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, 80 participants attended, in total. Details on attendance numbers by group can be found below.
- Each participant received an \$90 honorarium in respect of their time.

Group Locations and Composition

LOCATION	GROUP	LANGUAGE	DATE	TIME (EST)	GROUP COMPOSITION	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
Saskatchewan (Regina/Saskatoon)	1	English	Sept. 2	7:00-9:00 pm	Parents (of children in Junior Kindergarten to Grade 6)	8
Ontario (mid-size centres)	2	English	Sept. 3	6:00-8:00 pm	Parents (of children in Grades 7-12)	8
Quebec (mid-size centres)	3	French	Sept. 8	6:00-8:00 pm	Seniors (aged 55+)	6
Atlantic Canada	4	English	Sept. 9	5:00-7:00 pm	Gen Pop	7
Alberta (Calgary/Edmonton)	5	English	Sept. 10	8:00-10:00 pm	Seniors (aged 55+)	6
Ontario (major centres)	6	English	Sept. 14	6:00-8:00 pm	Parents (of children newborn to 6 years old, pregnant women, or those expecting to become pregnant within year)	5
Winnipeg/St. Boniface, Quebec, New Brunswick, Ontario	7	French	Sept. 15	6:00-8:00 pm	Francophones	7
National Capital Region, Winnipeg CMA	8	English	Sept. 22	7:00-9:00 pm	Indigenous people (First Nations, Métis, Inuit)	7
Quebec (smaller centres)	9	French	Sept. 24	6:00-8:00 pm	Gen Pop	6
B.C. (Vancouver/Lower Mainland)	10	English	Sept. 24	8:00-10:00 pm	Gen Pop	6
GMA CERB Recipients	11	French	Sept. 28	6:00-8:00 pm	CERB Recipients	6
GTA CERB Recipients	12	English	Sept. 29	6:00-8:00 pm	CERB Recipients	8
Total number of participants						80

Key Findings

Part I: COVID-19 Related Findings

Government of Canada in the News (All Locations)

In relation to what participants had seen, read or heard about the Government of Canada in the news, most mentioned issues related to the CERB and COVID-19.

Regarding the CERB, some participants were aware of the impending transition from CERB to EI, and a few commented on their impressions that the new programs were intended to be more accessible and to provide benefits for those previously not covered. Most, however, had heard only vague details about the end of CERB. Additionally, a few commented on the financial implications of the CERB and their viewpoints on its impact, both positive and negative, on the federal budget.

Regarding news related to COVID-19, many had heard about the different actions the Government of Canada had taken including extending the Canada-U.S. border closure, funding to keep schools safe, funding to secure a supply of COVID-19 vaccines, advertising related to the transmission of COVID-19 and the promotion of the COVID Alert App.

Participants were much slower to respond when asked a more specific question concerning what they had heard about Government of Canada actions regarding the current COVID-19 pandemic. Ultimately, few were able to recall any specifics.

COVID-19 Testing in the Community (GMA CERB Recipients, GTA CERB Recipients)

Participants in groups held among residents of the Greater Montreal Area (GMA) and the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) were asked specifically about what they had heard about COVID-19 testing capacity and procedures in their communities. Many had heard about lengthy delays, in terms of line-ups for getting a test and wait times for receiving the results, an increased demand for testing and the recruitment of hospital staff to man COVID-19 test facilities. Participants suggested many solutions to help issues related to testing capacity, including the popular idea of opening more drive-thru and mobile testing centres.

COVID-19 in the News (Major Centres Saskatchewan Parents, Mid-size Centres Ontario Parents)

In two groups undertaken among parents, participants were specifically asked what they had been hearing in the news about COVID-19. Most mentioned reports related to how COVID-19 may impact the start of the school year and the new protocol in place to prevent a second wave.

COVID Alert App (Mid-size Centres Ontario Parents)

Virtually all parents from mid-size centres in Ontario were aware of the Government of Canada's COVID Alert App and most reported they had downloaded it. The few who had not downloaded the

app cited two main reasons: they felt the app was unnecessary due to low case numbers in their area and/or they were worried that the app might track and store personal data.

Current COVID-19 Situation (Mid-size Centres Quebec Seniors, Major Centres Atlantic Canada, Major Centres Alberta Seniors)

In a few groups, held in the early weeks of September, participant's responses reflected a large degree of uncertainty, coupled with some degree of fear and stress, when asked about the current COVID-19 situation in Canada. These responses were mostly related to the fluidity of and changing nature of case counts across the country.

Some were of the view that Canadians had become overly-complacent with respect to wearing masks and maintaining social distancing, while others felt that inconsistent messaging across regions and jurisdictions in regards to specific protocols was contributing to public confusion. Some also expressed concerns about what they saw as less active communication by the Government of Canada, which left them with a sense that overall coordination and oversight was somewhat lacking.

Although participants acknowledged that Canada had done better in addressing COVID-19 relative to other countries, most were of the opinion that the spread of COVID-19 was not yet under control. Many participants were particularly concerned about the trajectory of the virus in Canada's large and densely populated urban centres.

Behaviour Change (Major Centres Saskatchewan Parents, Mid-size Centres Ontario Parents, Mid-size Centres Quebec Seniors, Major Centres Ontario Parents, Major Francophone Centres Parents, Winnipeg and NCR Indigenous Peoples, Smaller Centres Quebec, Lower Mainland, GMA CERB Recipients, GTA CERB Recipients)

In September, many participants reported some changes in behaviours and their daily routines in response to rising case counts in their province or community and, thus, were taking more precautions. This was particularly the case for people who considered themselves to be more 'at risk' or who were concerned about other family members with underlying health conditions.

Participants residing in areas with lower case counts, however, reported the opposite behaviours. They indicated that they were expanding their social circles and felt more comfortable going out to stores and restaurants. Additionally, some parents whose children were about to start the school year noted they had begun to venture out more with their children in order to establish a more normal routine.

Experience of Parents

When asked to describe the experience of parenting during the pandemic, parents' responses reflected a mix of experiences. Some found it exhausting and stressful, especially those who were working from home. Those who had returned to their place of work discussed the challenges of finding daycare. All parents found it challenging to entertain their children while also balancing the demands and pressures of work.

Although parents vocalized the stresses and pressures of parenting through COVID-19, some said they had developed a closer bond and deeper connection with their children. However, some parents did note that prolonged isolation had contributed to their children becoming more reserved, anxious and extremely attached to them, which was a cause for concern in terms of the transition to school and long-term psychological impacts.

Participants who were expecting at the time of the focus group said the main differences being pregnant during a pandemic included how little their partner could be involved in the experience, the necessity to take additional COVID-19 precautions; and not participating in the usual celebratory events. For those planning to have a baby in the near future, most reported the pandemic had done little to change their plans.

Experience of Seniors

Seniors were mixed in their response to being labeled as a 'vulnerable' group given they were over the age of 55. For the most part they did not wish to be singled out and generally felt that assistance and attention should be focused on anyone with a pre-existing health condition.

When asked how they would describe their experience living through the pandemic to someone in their twenties, some indicated they would tell young people to be more careful and emphasize that youth were just as much at risk as anyone else.

Impact on Household Budgets and Expenses

Almost all participants agreed that their spending habits had changed since the onset of the pandemic. Some indicated their spending had decreased and attributed this mostly to paying closer attention to their personal finances and purposeful decisions they had taken to reduce non-essential expenditures. Others observed that their monthly expenses had increased due primarily to higher costs for food and other basic household items where a shortage of supply had resulted in surge pricing. Higher expenses also reflected the fact that many were upgrading their home Internet to allow for multiple people who were now working or learning online from home. For the same reason, several participants remarked that their electricity costs had also risen.

Views on a Second Wave

Most participants agreed that there were clear signs of a second wave. Depending on the region in which they were located, they were either witnessing the early stages of a second wave or it was already full-blown. Participants attributed the second wave to a variety of behavioral factors, such as lax mask wearing, fatigue over the duration of the pandemic and a desire to socialize with friends and family. Many also believed that cases had not yet peaked and expressed concerns that the situation would likely worsen through the winter months and wondered about the additional impact of the onset of flu season.

Participants had mixed views regarding how prepared Canada was to handle a second wave of COVID-19. Some felt that having come through the initial phase of the pandemic, governments and agencies and the public were more prepared. Others felt quite differently, expressing concerns that Canadians

would have more difficulty adjusting to a second wave as they may be less fearful of the effects or take it less seriously. Regardless, several participants remarked that a second wave would cause additional stress and mental health issues, especially if further isolation is required.

Although participants' views varied on the extent and effectiveness of widespread lockdowns, the overall expectation was that more restrictions would likely be reinstated. Most agreed that international travel should continue to be restricted and borders should remain closed and some expected that restaurants and bars would again be closed. Some participants expressed a desire for provincial governments to take stronger measures: implementing fines for people and businesses not following guidelines around mask-wearing and social distancing, more consistent application of rules within and across provinces and a mandatory two-week quarantine. Others felt there were opportunities to apply these types of measures by taking a more targeted approach to respond to specific events or 'hot spots' viewed as causing transmission.

Impact of COVID-19

Looking ahead, most participants were worried about how COVID-19 would impact themselves, their families, and businesses in their communities. Many were concerned about job security, unemployment rates, the impacts on small businesses and the economy more generally.

Unprompted, some spoke about the toll the pandemic would take from the standpoint of people's mental health, specifically commenting on the magnifying effects of COVID-19 going into a second wave. Concerns were raised about ongoing fears for family members who are essential workers or employed in jobs which increase their risk of exposure to the virus. Others talked about the emotional toll of being unable to pursue their usual routine and the absence of social and spiritual engagement on their lives.

Financial Supports (Major Centres Saskatchewan Parents, Mid-size Centres Ontario Parents, GMA CERB Recipients, GTA CERB Recipients)

Views on Transition from CERB to EI/Recovery Benefits

In several groups an in-depth discussion was undertaken to gauge views on specific aspects of the various financial supports being provided by the Government of Canada. Participants were shown some information from the announcement, made in late August 2020, about the approach to transition from the CERB to a simplified Employment Insurance (EI) or one of three recovery benefits – The Canada Recovery Benefit (CRB), The Canada Recovery Caregiver Benefit (CRCB) or the Canada Recovery Sickness Benefit (CRSB).

Overall, many participants reacted positively when asked about this approach, suggesting that it would be beneficial for a wider group of people who may not have been previously eligible for the CERB. In particular, most responded favourably to having more options and coverage for self-employed persons, caregivers and for those required to take sick leave. Most felt the benefit amounts were reasonable and appreciated that they were clearly defined. Some noted that it remained roughly the

same as it had been under CERB, which they viewed as acceptable. However, the benefit amount was a greater concern for participants currently in receipt of the CERB who felt some may struggle to keep up with their monthly bills. In particular, the benefit amount was seen as insufficient for disabled persons and/or those without coverage for prescription drugs.

Although some expressed concern about federal government spending, it was also the view of participants that as the economy opens up this would result in reduced fiscal pressure on the Government of Canada and fewer people in need of these supports.

Participants in groups held in Saskatchewan and Ontario were asked which considerations were the most important when considering the transition from the CERB to EI. Most were focused on ensuring there was no delay in the transition from the old to the new system. The general consensus was that people who had been relying on the CERB needed some reliability and continuity in terms of financial supports. A few participants did feel strongly about the other considerations – ensuring that those who qualify for CERB also qualify for EI or the new benefits, and that the federal government should be trying to reduce the amounts paid out and the overall deficit.

Timelines for EI and Recovery Benefits

When participants, across all groups, were asked about their views on how long benefits should stay in place, responses varied widely, reflecting a high degree of uncertainty about the future and the fluidity of the current situation. A few participants put forward an unlimited timeframe – for as long as necessary – while others linked the duration of benefits to the timing of a vaccine becoming available or the lifting of social distancing and stay-at-home restrictions.

When participants were told that the simplified EI system and the new recovery benefits would be in place for one year and, aside from the Canada Recovery Sickness Benefit, would provide a minimum entitlement of 26 weeks of regular benefits, they were generally comfortable with this timeframe. However, many participants also expressed considerable uncertainty about the one-year timeframe and proposed it should be re-evaluated based on evolving events and circumstances or by having modified approaches by industry or sector. On balance, participants concluded that the fluidity of the situation made it difficult to determine an appropriate timeframe during which these benefits should stay in place. They felt they could not predict with any accuracy how quickly the economy might rebound and what the situation would look like in the spring of 2021.

Concerns about Transition (GMA CERB Recipients, GTA CERB Recipients)

Most receiving CERB benefits did not have any concerns about the transition, although many indicated that they were simply unclear on the process and specifics. Some commented that it appeared to be a fairly seamless transition, although a few expressed some worries about an inability to obtain clarity around their questions, delays in receiving forms and the issue of tax implications for those receiving benefits.

Economy (Major Centres Atlantic Canada, Major Centres Alberta Seniors, Major Centres Ontario Parents, Major Francophone Centres Parents)

Participants' awareness of Government of Canada activities in support of economic recovery was modest, although some were quick to point out key steps the government had taken with respect to implementing the CERB, in addition to financial aid for students and other groups, and wage subsidies directed to businesses with the aim of encouraging more economic activity.

Discussion focused on four different phrases describing what the goals of Canada's economic recovery could be:

- The phrase *'We need to build back better'* emerged as the preferred choice across the four groups. It was interpreted as a broad, all-encompassing and unifying statement that also encapsulated the ideas of strengthening and restoring the economy, with a particular focus on making it better. The idea of moving into a position of strength and a reinvigorated, improved economy, post-pandemic, resounded with many participants. The main criticism was that this phrase was already in use in the election campaign within the U.S. and within the United Kingdom.
- There was a modest level of support the phrase *'We need a more resilient country'*. Many participants responded positively to the idea of an economy that demonstrates more resiliency, interpreting this as meaning one which is more self-sufficient and responsive to economic shocks, including another pandemic. Resiliency reflected forward momentum, while building back better implied looking back.
- A few participants responded positively to *'We need a green recovery'*, believing that the time was right to invest in environmentally friendly technologies which aligned with their values of environmental protection and sustainability.
- Participants were most critical of the phrase *'We need a green new deal'*. It suggested completely restarting the economy and concerns were raised that it would single out the Alberta economy in particular. Moreover, participants connected the term with American initiatives, both currently and during the Great Depression.

Schools (Major Centres Saskatchewan Parents, Mid-size Centres Ontario Parents)

Awareness of Back to School Plans

Parents were well aware of the back-to-school plans in each of their jurisdictions and the relevant provincial initiatives. Those in Saskatchewan were familiar with the Saskatchewan Safe School Plan and aware that it had been revised both to address the evolving situation and to provide the public with more detail. Parents in Ontario knew that the Ontario plan was available online and that parents could sign up by e-mail to receive further updates, although they did mention their concerns about the variation in plans from one board to another and expressed some frustration that they had received information in what they felt was a piecemeal fashion.

Parents in both groups were aware of delayed starts to the school year, staggered school openings and the introduction of a range of distancing measures (such as spacing on buses, cancellation of

group activities and smaller internal bubbles) and sanitary procedures (such as mask protocols and the introduction of sanitizing stations).

Parents' Plans, Issues and Concerns

Participants were then provided with some additional information on the back to school plans in each jurisdiction and were asked if they intended to send their children to school in person. Most said that they were willing to send their children back into the school, although their reasons for doing so varied. Some parents were limited by not having an option for their child to participate online, while others focused more so on their children's mental health and social needs as well as their optimal learning environment. Working parents spoke about the importance of getting their children back into school, as it would allow them to work either more productively at home or to be able to return to their own workplace.

This is not to say that parents were completely comfortable with in-person schooling. Many of them were concerned, mentioning that sending their children back to school required a level of trust that all parents/families were taking precautions, concerns about children not adhering to health and safety protocols and a perceived inability of schools to adequately implement distancing practices. Some parents described the decision to send their children back to school during COVID-19 as one of the most difficult they have had to make. They felt that, either way, they would carry some feelings of guilt. While they did not want to purposely place their children in harm's way and worried about the increased risk of their child catching COVID-19 and of its possible long-term effects, they were equally concerned about the impact of further isolation on their child's behaviour. Many parents were also worried about their children spreading infection in their communities, especially the possible impacts on other family members, such as grandparents.

Safer Schools

When asked what they thought was needed to make things safer at school parents primarily focused on issues of class size, hiring more teachers and spreading students out. There was a consensus that reducing class sizes, would be the most helpful and cited a range of ideas such as 'stagger days', moving students to make use of spare/less used spaces and taking advantage of outdoor education opportunities. They were quite realistic about the dual challenge of adding extra teachers and having to find the extra space if class sizes were reduced.

Most parents had heard something about Government of Canada's announcement to help make schools safer, although few were aware of the specifics. They generally understood that it involved funding for each province and agreed that this was a positive contribution, but they also felt that once the overall amount of \$2 billion was broken out and distributed across the provinces it would not be sufficient. When asked what else the Government of Canada could do in this area, there were only a few comments including providing rapid testing, incentives for home schooling and possibly formally mandate class sizes.

Part II: Other Issues

Seasonal Flu Concept Testing (Mid-size Centres Quebec Seniors, Major Centres Atlantic Canada, Major Centres Alberta Seniors, Major Centres Ontario Parents, Major Francophone Centres Parents)

In five groups, participants were shown two concepts, each containing a series of three banner images which were under development by the Government of Canada for a possible advertising campaign regarding the seasonal vaccine.

Reaction to the two concepts varied and there was no clear consensus on a direct question as to which one of the two concepts was seen to be most effective in terms of its motivating Canadians to get a flu shot. Overall, participants felt the target audience was clear as was the main message – to get the flu shot – although participants’ comments suggested that the extent to which either concept was effective in motivating participants to do so varied within and across the groups.

Reaction to Concept 1 – ‘This year’ – was more mixed to negative. In general, however, Concept 1 was viewed as more assertive and coercive, leaving participants feeling somewhat guilty if they had not already been vaccinated for the flu. Participants took issue with the question asked on the first frame – ‘*We got the flu shot this year, did you?*’ – claiming that it was overly directive and forceful. Some described it as bullying and commented that it was divisive – setting up an ‘us versus them’ dynamic (i.e., those who got vaccinated and those who didn’t). At the same time, participants did respond positively to the notions of protecting one’s family and limiting the risk of complications from the flu (the message in the second and third frames), both of which reinforced the importance of the flu vaccine in the current COVID-19 context. On the issue of masks, participants’ were of two minds – some felt it was relevant and would reinforce the importance of getting a flu shot while others felt it created confusion especially in situations showing presumed family members wearing masks, although they were likely to be residing in the same household and should not be required to wear a mask when they are together.

By contrast, many participants found Concept 2 more forward-looking and inviting in its tone and approach, acting as a reminder that now is the time to start thinking ahead and to book a date/time to get vaccinated. Overall this concept received more positive commentary. Participants liked the reference to making a plan. It served as a polite reminder to make the flu shot a priority and participants felt that making a plan demonstrated more of a commitment to getting the vaccination – the use of the word ‘plan’ was thought to encourage the public to take specific steps or actions. The perceived clarity of the message was also reinforced by mention of the flu on all three frames.

In general, participants responded favourably to the simplicity of these concepts, the minimalist look and feel, especially in terms of text, contrasting colour palettes and uplifting imagery.

A possible accompanying statement – *This fall, we’re protecting ourselves, our communities, and our healthcare system from the flu. Let’s keep everyone safe* – was favourably received. It was viewed as motivating, direct and supportive, evoking a sense of inclusiveness and community.

Childhood Vaccination Concept Testing (Major Centres Ontario Parents, Major Francophone Centres Parents)

Two short videos to be used for a possible advertising campaign promoting childhood vaccinations were shown to two groups of parents. Participants responded positively to both, finding them to be clear, to the point, relatable, relevant and reassuring. There was general consensus that the primary objective of the ads was to act as a reminder to parents to protect themselves and their families by having their children vaccinated and to keep their children's vaccinations up-to-date. A secondary message around the general safety of vaccines was thought to be implied through specific vignettes showing safety measures parents take with their children, including a child wearing a helmet while riding a scooter, in a car seat, and holding a parent's hand while crossing at a designated crosswalk. All these scenarios were viewed as relatable, especially those showing children at various stages – newborn, infant, and toddler – which reinforced the 'routine' nature of scheduled vaccinations.

Participants found both videos to be quite similar in message and the tone. On balance, however, there was a slight preference for Video 1 over Video 2. The former was seen as more inclusive as it showed both a mother and a father, underscoring the involvement of both parents. The main critique of the latter centered on the ambiguity of the parent shown in the first scene, as the face/gender was obscured.

Many participants indicated that, given the message and the tone, the ads would draw their attention, and several commented that they would be likely to share the video with other new parents as well as family and friends who are expecting a child. A number of parents remarked that, after seeing the ad, they would double-check the status of their child's/children's vaccinations, talk to a health professional, or further research the prescribed regime of vaccinations.

When it was pointed out that neither the mother nor the nurse shown in the vaccination scene in both ads were wearing masks, participants reacted both positively and negatively, although this issue did not significantly detract from the perceived effectiveness of either concept. Some felt the actors should be shown wearing masks, especially if the ad was to be aired while the pandemic was ongoing. They worried that it may send a confusing signal at a time when public health officials have been emphasizing mask wearing. Others held the opposite view, commenting that it was a relief to see an ad in which people were not wearing masks. They also felt that, given the focus on the flu, masks were not imperative to this particular message.

Opioids (Major Centres Saskatchewan Parents)

In Saskatchewan, many participants had recently heard about opioids either through news stories or personal connections. Some had heard reports of more opioid-related deaths in B.C. than from COVID-19, while many felt as though the opioid crisis was national in scope and getting worse. Participants generally referred to the situation as an epidemic and spoke about an increase in fentanyl use and related overdoses, which they believed had been exacerbated by the pandemic.

Participants suggested possible root causes of the opioid crisis, a number of which were linked to COVID-19. Many participants perceived COVID-19 have exacerbated underlying mental health and domestic violence issues resulting in a heavier reliance on opioids and created challenges to obtaining support/rehabilitation services. There were also concerns that other illegally obtained drugs were increasingly being laced with fentanyl without the user's knowledge or awareness.

Participants were united in their opinions about what the Government of Canada could do to help mitigate the crisis. They advocated for multiple actions, including more mental health resources, more safe injection sites and more education about addiction and mental health. When asked specifically about their views on decriminalizing possession of illicit drugs, many responded favorably since they felt this approach would focus more on rehabilitation and offer people greater access to mental health resources and other assistance. Several participants emphasized that incarceration, in their view, only served to continue the cycle of dependency.

Pharmacare (Mid-size Centres Quebec Seniors, Major Centres Atlantic Canada, Major Centres Alberta Seniors)

Familiarity and Perceived Importance

Many participants were familiar with the term 'Pharmacare' and associated it with subsidized healthcare, specifically making access to prescription drugs more affordable. However, only a few were aware of any Government of Canada plans related to Pharmacare and could not recall any specific details or suggested that the plan targeted certain groups such as families, low-income households and seniors.

After being provided with some additional information on the Government of Canada's plan for Pharmacare, most participants agreed that a national Pharmacare program was an important priority relative to other healthcare priorities. Although, seniors in Quebec were less inclined to hold this view. In general, the key benefits of this program were seen as lowering drug prices and broadening coverage. However, some had questions about how the plan would be structured and administered.

Despite the ongoing global pandemic, the consensus from participants was that COVID-19 was not a significant factor in whether or not Canada needed a national Pharmacare program and that it should be a major priority at any time. When further questioned about the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable populations, including low income seniors, some participants did see the value of Pharmacare in providing assistance to these groups. At the same time, other participants were of the opinion that many seniors already have sufficient healthcare coverage or that the 'unknowns' regarding COVID-19 suggest that access to Pharmacare would have little impact.

Participants were also asked to consider Pharmacare within the context of reduced hospitalizations, and that by ensuring people have better access to affordable medications, it could lower the likelihood of treatment in hospital thereby freeing up institutional capacity to deal with other issues like pandemics. Overall, most participants agreed with this view and tended to favour an approach to healthcare which focused on prevention over treatment.

What Pharmacare Could Look Like

Universal versus 'Safety Net' Approach

Almost unanimously, participants favoured a universal approach in terms of what a national Pharmacare program could look like over a 'safety net' plan, which would only apply to Canadians when prescription drug costs exceed a percentage of their income. They viewed a universal plan as Canadian-wide, all-encompassing, socially responsible, a fair and equal approach, and one that would not exclude anyone. There was a strongly held view that an income-based approach, like the 'safety net' plan, would be both challenging to administer and potentially unfair given the variability in the cost-of-living across Canada and individual circumstances.

Public versus "Close the Gaps" Approach

Participants were asked about the benefits of a public approach (where all Canadians are on the same plan), versus one which 'closes the gaps' (in which people could still use existing public /private plans, but would be set up to ensure everyone receives coverage, including those not currently covered). While some preferred a public approach for reasons of fairness, consistency, and equal treatment for all Canadians, concerns were expressed by many that it would mean all Canadians would be paying into it regardless of the extent to which they used or were able to access the program.

When asked which approach was fairer, participants' views were split. Some favoured a public approach, commenting that everyone should have the same access to prescription drugs, however, a few tended to favour the alternative. These participants suggested that the 'close the gaps' approach might be easier to administer, less costly and would take into account those already receiving benefits through their employer.

Drug Coverage

Asked to consider a number of options in terms of which drugs should be covered through Pharmacare, participants struggled to make a definitive choice without further information about the nature and costs of commonly prescribed drugs and the financial implication of each option presented. Views varied widely from those who believed all drugs should be covered, to those who felt the program should be restricted to covering only lifesaving medicines. One area of consensus, however, was that the list of drugs covered should be the same from province to province.

As part of this discussion, participants were also asked about specialized high-cost drugs used to treat rare diseases and most agreed that these types of drugs should be covered in order to improve patient quality of life and possibly offer a cure.

On the issue of who should pay for a national Pharmacare program, many participants favoured an approach whereby Canadians would cover part of the cost through either a Pharmacare premium or small payments (e.g., a dispensing fee for a prescription). Some participants also supported having employers pay for part of Pharmacare, particularly if the approach taken was universal, allowing employers to reduce or eliminate this aspect of their own benefits coverage for employees.

Most participants were comfortable with using the term “Pharmacare” for this program, describing it as clear and self-explanatory. Others, however, felt the term reflected an American approach to healthcare. Overall, most participants felt that Pharmacare was a good idea, and felt that the implementation of a universal Pharmacare system would generate positive health outcomes, thereby lowering overall costs for Canada’s healthcare system.

Indigenous Issues (Winnipeg and NCR Indigenous Peoples)

Government of Canada and Indigenous Issues

Indigenous participants believed that the key area of focus for the Government of Canada should be on addressing core human needs for Indigenous peoples, particularly ensuring clean, potable water on reserves, but also food and housing. Important issues such as cultural revitalisation, rediscovery of language, economic development and economic sovereignty were also raised.

Some participants expressed a desire to see the federal government taking a more active leadership role on Indigenous issues in general and, in particular, adopting an Indigenous world view. Many emphasized a stronger Government of Canada focus on the recommendations stemming from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and more action in regards to the outcome of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

Nova Scotia Fisheries

When prompted, participants were generally aware of the issues between Indigenous and non-Indigenous fishers in Nova Scotia. There was agreement across the group that Indigenous fishers were not being treated fairly. Most felt that this was an important issue for the Government of Canada to address in order to avoid any further escalation.

UNDRIP (The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples)

All participants were familiar with UNDRIP and, at a minimum, had heard of the Declaration. However, understanding of the specifics was less detailed.

After being presented some additional information, participants were asked what changes they would expect to see if Canada fully implemented UNDRIP. Most anticipated that acceptance of the Declaration would mean seeing an Indigenous point of view expressed more clearly and more often in government discussions, policy proposals and decisions. In particular, participants felt this should also mean a greater focus on sustainability and, in this regard, the resource sector was referred to explicitly. There was also an expectation that Indigenous viewpoints would be heard within the educational system. Participants discussed curriculum change and their expectation that if UNDRIP were to be fully implemented more people would come to understand the place and contribution of Indigenous people in Canada.

Racism

Asked to define systemic racism, most believed that it involved covert, subconscious or unspoken behaviours that occur and are evident in virtually all aspects of daily life, throughout the various agencies and services with which Indigenous people interact. By many in the group, racism was seen as normal practice in Canada and a factor of how most Canadians have been raised and educated.

Participants overwhelmingly agreed that systemic racism exists in Canada. It was their view that it starts with the education system which they felt provided an inaccurate portrait of the history and rights of Indigenous people in one's formative years which subsequently carried through adulthood. The Indian Act was a focal point of discussion and some made the point that the way in which it is discussed, has left an inaccurate impression among non-Indigenous people that Indigenous people receive many 'free' services not available to other Canadians, leading to an adversarial dynamic.

Beyond the education system, participants felt systemic racism is perpetrated within other Canadian institutions and systems, including in healthcare, law enforcement and other civil/democratic systems. Suggestions from participants on changes to existing institutions to reduce systemic racism centered on ensuring a stronger commitment to enriching the perspective of front-line workers in law enforcement and to increasing diversity in these workplaces. In particular, it was suggested that increasing the number of Indigenous people in law enforcement and the legal-judicial system would provide a more balanced perspective and a better understanding.

Drinking Water

A few participants were aware of the Government of Canada's efforts to lift long-term drinking water advisories on reserves. After being shown an infographic from Indigenous Services Canada on the progress on lifting long-term drinking water advisories on public systems on reserves (see Appendix C), participant's reactions were mostly positive and described the progress as encouraging and as good news. However, there was a mention of ongoing barriers to progress, including a shortage of trained technicians on reserve, delays resulting from litigation between some First Nations communities and the federal government and disputes between commercial entities.

When asked how they would rate the progress of the Government of Canada on this issue and what more it could be doing, participants mentioned the linkage to land claims and the need to return lands (and thereby access to clean water) to Indigenous communities. They emphasized the need for both sides – the federal government as well as leadership on reserves – to prioritize this issue, to move more quickly and to ensure proper oversight of funds directed to infrastructure improvements.

Speech from the Throne (Smaller Centres Quebec, Lower Mainland, GMA CERB Recipients, GTA CERB Recipients)

Recall of the Speech from the Throne

Awareness of the Speech from the Throne (SFT), delivered on September 23, 2020, was modest across all groups. While there was little familiarity with the details, participants commented hearing about a

few COVID-19 related topics including the transition from CERB to EI and enhanced sick leave and caregiver benefits, and mentions of federal government partnerships with pharmaceutical companies to develop COVID-19 vaccines.

Government of Canada Pillars

All four pillars from the SFT shared with participants were seen as appropriate and, in fact, complementary and overlapping areas of focus for the Government of Canada. The last pillar - *'Support people and business through the crisis, as long as it lasts, whatever it takes'* - was rated as most important to participants personally, as it was seen as being the most timely, relevant and tangible of the four pillars. Comparatively, some felt the first two themes - *'Build back better, to create a stronger and more resilient Canada'* and *'Fight the pandemic and save lives'* sounded too much like marketing slogans or part of an advertising campaign. A few participants felt that the third pillar - *'Stand up for who we are as Canadians, making progress on gender equality, reconciliation, and fighting discrimination'* - was important, but thought this should be an ongoing goal and less of a specific focus at the current time.

Government of Canada Priorities (Smaller Centres Quebec, Lower Mainland B.C.)

After being shown the 12 specific priorities from the Government of Canada's SFT, participants were asked to identify up to three that they deemed to be the most important to them personally. Among all statements shown, a cluster of five emerged as important, including:

- Creating a national, universal pharmacare program;
- Ensuring faster COVID-19 testing;
- Working with the provinces to set new national standards for long-term care;
- Creating one million jobs; and
- Investing in training for workers.

On the health front, participants advocated for greater access to healthcare services, rapid COVID-19 testing and the need to address long-term care issues across Canada.

Participants also focused on Canada's economic health, including job retention, creation and training, particularly for those just getting into the workforce, and noted that some industries have been more adversely affected by the pandemic.

Most were hesitant to single any priority out as something Government of Canada should not do, commenting that they were all valid areas on which to focus either now or in the future. There were, however, some concerns about giving municipalities the ability to further restrict or ban handguns and strengthen measures to control the flow of illegal handguns in Canada.

Overall, participants concluded that the federal government appeared to be moving in the right direction and viewed the SFT quite favourably. There were few suggestions in response to a question as to whether the government had missed any significant opportunities or if there were other priorities on which it should focus, with the exception of the following:

- Giving more attention to Indigenous issues;
- Addressing homelessness and housing;
- Adding dental care to the roster of healthcare benefits that are universally covered;
- Focusing on the future, and specifically long-term projects that may not be particularly popular or politically expedient, but are necessary; and
- Communicating what the federal government is doing day to day and month to month.

Government of Canada Budget Deficit (GMA CERB Recipients, GTA CERB Recipients)

Asked if they had heard anything about the Government of Canada's projected budget deficit, most had not. Those few who had knew or speculated that it would be large expressed some concerns that it would have to be paid back at some point, but also felt that the expenditures were necessary at this time.

MORE INFORMATION

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