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2023 Travellers' Risk Perceptions, Attitudes and Preferences

Executive Summary

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Prepared for the Public Health Agency of Canada by Abacus Data

March 2023

The Public Health Agency of Canada commissioned Abacus Data to conduct a public opinion research survey to understand how international travellers have adjusted their travel habits, and in particular, their travel health preparation since the onset of COVID-19, and to understand where travellers are seeking travel health advice (if at all). A total of 3200 Canadians who have or intend to travel to an international destination were surveyed using an online panel. The online survey was conducted between April 18 and May 5, 2023.

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français sous le titre: Attitudes, préférences et perceptions des voyageurs à l'égard des risques, en 2023.

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1. Executive Summary

1.1. Research Purpose

The Travel Health Program delivered by the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) is responsible for promoting effective communication of travel health risks and mitigation strategies to Canadians, partners and stakeholders. The goal is to support Canadians' ability to make informed choices when it comes to travel to protect their health (day-to-day and in times of urgency) and minimize the importation and exportation of infectious disease across Canada's border.

In 2019, PHAC conducted a previous survey of travellers to non-U.S. international destinations. Since this earlier survey, the pandemic and the accompanying border measures that were implemented in Canada and across the globe may have changed how travellers perceive risk and take actions to protect their health. An assessment of current attitudes and practices regarding planned travel will help with future program planning and guide improvements to the program and web content.

1.2. Research Objectives

The primary objective of the research is to assess attitudes and perception of risk of international travellers (either those who have or intend to travel) since 2019 and the onset of COVID-19.

Specifically, the survey will be used to:

- Assess how attitudes and perception of risk has changed among international travellers since 2019 and the onset of COVID-19;
- Evaluate whether travellers have adjusted their travel habits, and in particular, their travel health preparation since the onset of COVID-19; and
- Understand where travellers are seeking travel health advice (if at all).

1.3. Methodology

Quantitative Research

The online quantitative survey was conducted between April 18 and May 5, 2023. A total of 3,200 surveys were completed across Canada using an online panel. To qualify a respondent must either intend to travel in the next year or have travelled in the past year to an international destination. To be comparable with the 2019 survey, 2000 surveys were targeted to those who travel to non-U.S. international destinations. The other 1000 were targeted to those who travel to the United States. An additional oversample of 100 recent migrants (came to Canada in the past five years) and 100 frequent travellers was also completed.

As a non-probability sample, the results cannot be extrapolated to a broader audience and there is no margin of error associated with the findings.

For ease of reading, international travellers are those respondents who have in the past year or intend in the next year to travel to a non-U.S. destination. U.S. travellers are those who have in the past year or intend in the next year to travel to the United States. Note there is overlap (one can be a traveller to the U.S. as well as non-U.S. destinations).

The data are presented unweighted as was the case for the 2019 survey that is referenced throughout the report. Since the data are not weighted to a known population for both surveys, there is a modest risk that differences in the values between the two surveys reflect sampling variability and non-response bias across the two surveys.

Recent migrants are defined as non-citizens who have come to Canada in the past five years.

Frequent travellers are defined as those who travel at least 2 trips per year to non-U.S. international destinations or who travel at least 2 trips to the U.S and 1 trip per year to non-U.S. international destinations.

Sub-group analyses and rounding

In addition to descriptive analysis, analysis was undertaken to establish any differences in views based on personal demographic characteristics such as location (province and rural versus urban), gender, and age) as well as travel related characteristics such as destinations, frequency and purpose of travel. The reliability of comparisons is established by two considerations: the number of cases of the groups being analyzed, and the size of the differences between the groups. Standard statistical testing using columns percentages with a p-value of < 0.05 was applied in the tables.

Please note that due to rounding, in some cases it may appear that merged categories collapsed together are different by a percentage point from how they are presented individually, and totals may not add up to 100%.

The full breakdown of the results is included in the accompanying data tables under separate cover.

Qualitative Research

The qualitative phase of the research consisted of six (6) online focus groups with the Canadian public conducted between August 28-30, 2023. In total, there were 65 participants across all six focus groups.

All participants must have travelled outside of Canada within the past 12 months and/or have plans to travel outside of Canada in the next 12 months. Each focus group was 90 minutes in length.

Observers from PHAC attended each focus group.

The focus groups were moderated based on an approved discussion guide and included a review of materials developed by PHAC.

1.4. Contract value

The total contract value for the project was \$139,037.46 including applicable taxes.

1.5. Statement of Political Neutrality

I hereby certify as a representative of Abacus Data that the deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in the Communications Policy of the Government of Canada and Procedures for Planning and Contracting Public Opinion Research. Specifically, the deliverables do not include information on electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, standings with the electorate or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leaders.



Richard Jenkins, Ph.D., CAIP

1.6. Summary of Findings

To address the objectives of this research and to be able to make comparisons to a 2019 survey of International travellers, the focus is on Canadians who have travelled outside of Canada and the United States, including Alaska and Hawaii in the past 12 months or those who plan to in the next twelve months (hereinafter called "international travellers").

Canadian International Travellers' Travel Habits

More than two thirds of international travellers surveyed take at least one international trip per year (69%) which is up from 53% in 2019. Consistent with the 2019 results, in the past 12 (twelve) months, international trips were most often to Europe (28%), Mexico (19%), the Caribbean (17%), and Asia (15%). Fewer travelled to Central America (8%), Territories of the United States (7%), South America (5%), the Middle East (5%), Africa (5%), Australia or New Zealand (3%), or the Pacific Islands (1%). Almost half (45%) also travelled to the U.S.

Intended travel over the next 12 (twelve) months takes a similar pattern, with plans most likely to involve trips to Europe (38%), the Caribbean (21%), Mexico (20%), and/or Asia (17%). Fewer plan to travel to Central America (9%), the Territories of the United States (7%) South America (7%), the Middle East (5%), Africa (4%), Australia or New Zealand (4%), or the Pacific Islands (1%).

When it comes to booking international travel, more than half of international travellers (54%) typically book their travel arrangements two or more months in advance of travelling. The remainder book a month or less in advance. In 2019, significantly more (65%) booked their travel two or months in advance.

Focus group participants report that they have not changed how they plan for a trip pre- versus post-COVID-19. Some participants acknowledged that they do now check for vaccination or other entry requirements but this tends to be quite destination specific (i.e. not done for all destinations), and tends to be done only to secure access to the country, as opposed to being motivated by health concerns.

Attitudes Towards Travel Health Risks

Many (63%) international travellers agree (completely or somewhat) that travelling internationally poses health risks that are not present in Canada but this is down substantially from 2019 (75%). Just over half (56% down from 64% in 2019) believe (completely/somewhat) that all international travellers should see a health care professional before they travel or that an appointment should be booked with a health care professional at least six weeks before going on an international trip (57% down from 62%). So while the perceived risks have declined, there has been only modest change in perceptions around the need to see a health professional before international travel.

International travellers assess the level of health risk to be either low or medium for most types of travel. Travel for volunteer/humanitarian work (38% high compared with 55% in 2019), adventure travel (32% and 45%) and travel for medical procedures (30%) is considered “high” risk by more international travellers compared to other types of travel. Notably, travel for volunteer/humanitarian work and adventure travel are perceived as less risky than in 2019. There is little change in the perceived level of risk for tourism or pleasure, travelling to a familiar location, visiting friends and family, for education or research, or for a destination you frequently visit.

Travel health risk plays a role when choosing a travel destination for most international travellers. Nearly one-quarter (26%) indicate travel related health risks influence their destination choice to a great extent and 38% indicate health risks influence their destination to a moderate extent. This is virtually unchanged since 2019 when 30% were influenced to a great extent.

The focus groups highlighted the fact that health risks are not a top of mind consideration when travellers are planning trips; costs, travel logistics (e.g. flights, accommodations, etc.), activities (e.g. attractions, things to do), purpose of trip (e.g. visiting family, work), a desire to visit a destination (e.g. on their ‘bucket list’) and even weather (e.g. sunny winter break) are thought of ahead of health risks when planning a trip.

Researching Travel-Related Health Risks and Recommendations

The vast majority (92% compared with 89% in 2019) of international travellers look for health risks and associated travel health recommendations prior to travel. Some (29% down from 40%) look for health risks more than six weeks before their trip, while 63% look in the six weeks leading up to their trip. This may reflect a recognition that things can change quickly when it comes to health risks and recommendations.

The choice of destination emerged in the focus groups as a major influence on how much effort travellers put into understanding and preparing for health risks. For destinations perceived as higher risk, typical actions that travellers take pre-departure include researching health risks and visiting a health professional (e.g., to get required vaccinations and medications). At destination, travellers will take appropriate measures such as being cautious about consuming local foods and water, applying insect repellent and practicing good hand hygiene.

Less than half (46%) of all international travellers look at health risks every time they travel to an international destination. This is unchanged from 2019. One quarter (25% down from 31% in 2019) look when they are travelling to places that they believe have health risks and 19% look when they are travelling to a destination for the first time. Hearing about health risks in the news or social media (19% compared with 21%) or from family or friends (15% compared with 14%) are also circumstances that would lead some travellers to look for information.

Interestingly, while less than half (46%) of international travellers look at health risks every time they travel to an international destination, compared with 2019 fewer international travellers consider it very important to know about:

- Vaccinations required to enter the country (67% very important compared with 79% in 2019);
- Infectious diseases or illness they can get from food and/or water at the destination (64% compared with 78%);
- Vaccinations or medications recommended to prevent diseases or illnesses that occur at the destination (61% compared to 74%);
- Infectious diseases or illness they can get from other people at the destination (60% compared with 71%); and/or
- Infectious diseases or illness they can get from insects at the destination (56% compared with 70%).

The top sources of information to plan or book travel to an international destination for international travellers are Internet search engines (51% compared with 58% in 2019), online booking websites (44%, which is the same as 2019), government websites (42%, which is the same as 2019), travel websites (40% compared with 49%) and, friends and family (which is almost the same as 2019; 40% compared with 41%).

Focus group participants stated they “Google” and rely on online travel websites such as Tripadvisor, Expedia and travel blogs (e.g. on YouTube and other social media) for information on flights, accommodation, attractions, and other aspects of the destination and travel experience. Word of mouth (from family and friends) is also an important source of information about travel destinations (e.g., activities, restaurants, local travel, etc.). Several travellers mentioned the Government of Canada website for entry requirements, while a few older travellers check in with a travel agent.

International travellers trust a variety of sources for accurate information about travel health. Government of Canada websites are trusted by nearly six in ten (60% compared with 63% in 2019) of international travellers followed by health care professionals (41% compared with 56%), international agencies (33% compared with 41%), provincial government websites (33% compared with 29%) and/or travel health clinics (30% compared with 40%). Although trust in Canadian government sources has not changed, there is a notable decline in the proportion who trust international agencies, health professionals and travel health clinics since 2019.

Consistent with the quantitative findings in the focus groups the most trusted sources of information are doctors and government (especially the federal government), and family.

Risk Mitigation Behaviours

Across a number of risk mitigation behaviours, international travellers place the highest importance on purchasing or having existing travel health insurance (61% very important). This is significantly lower than in 2019 (72%). Other important things to do before travelling, which are also much lower in importance are:

- Making sure routine vaccinations are up-to-date (60% down from 71%);
- Obtaining the recommended vaccinations or medications for their travel destination (60% down from 72%);
- Following travel health recommendations to prepare oneself for health risks that are present at the destination (58% down from 70%); and
- Looking for health risks that are present at their destination (56% down from 65%).

Few believe that it is very important see a health care professional (35% down from 49% in 2019), visit a travel health clinic (30% compared with 38%) and/or consult a pharmacist (26% compared with 29%). Only the latter is not a significant decline from 2019.

Less than 1% of international travellers indicate they would definitely not follow travel health recommendations when travelling to a destination where officials have issued a public health advisory for an infectious disease or illness. The large majority would definitely (62%) or probably (28%) follow travel health recommendations.

Nearly all (96%) international travellers report undertaking a variety of risk mitigation activities prior to embarking on a trip. This is mostly unchanged from 2019 when 94% did something. The top actions taken are to purchase or have existing travel health insurance (47% compared with 58% in 2019) and make sure their routine vaccinations are up-to-date (46% compared with 48%). Other activities include:

- Getting advice on how to protect themselves against health risks at their destination (43% compared with 42%);
- Research health risks present at their destination (40% compared with 50%);
- Obtain vaccinations required to enter the country (42% compared with 49%);
- Obtain recommended vaccinations or medications to prevent diseases that occur at the destination (35% vs. 46%);
- See a health care professional (27% compared with 40%);
- Visit a travel health clinic (22%; no change from 2019); and
- Consult a pharmacist (19% compared with 20%).

In the focus groups, participants indicated that they take a variety of actions to mitigate health risks, some of which have been influenced by COVID-19. Top activities are ensuring they pack enough medications, confirming and/or purchasing travel medical insurance, packing hand sanitizer and masks, visiting travel health clinic/doctor to get vaccinations and taking care of self prior to the trip to be in good health. COVID-19 and the resulting publicity around vaccines has not, however, increased the likelihood that these travellers consult with a doctor or travel health clinic when planning their trips.

Virtually all international travellers (98%) report undertaking at least some risk mitigation activities to protect their health during their trip and this is unchanged from 2019. The top activity is cleaning one's hands regularly (62% compared with 68% in 2019). Next most frequent are avoiding close contact with sick individuals (56% compared with 67%), practicing proper coughing and sneezing etiquette (55% compared with 57%), and/or practice safe eating and drinking habits (55% compared with 76%). Less than half protect themselves from insect bites (48% compared with 65%), avoid close contact with wild animals (45% compared with 56%), wear a mask on planes and other public transportation (41%; added in 2023) and/or practice social distancing (37%; added in 2023).

International travellers are impacted by a number of considerations when deciding whether or not to follow recommendations to protect themselves from getting sick on an international trip. The main factors include:

- Not wanting to get sick (63% very important);
- The likelihood of spreading illnesses to loved ones and others upon return (57% compared with 68% in 2019);
- How well the recommended actions will work (48% compared with 55%);
- The possible side effects of the recommended actions (44% compared with 49%);
- The type of activities the traveller is planning on doing on the trip (43% compared with 47%); and
- The current incidence or risk of COVID-19 (42%).

Compared to 2019 fewer travellers typically visit a health care professional or go to a travel health clinic. The main reasons or beliefs are around the idea of already being prepared for or aware of the risks associated with their travel such as:

- Being up-to-date on all vaccines (34% compared with 35% in 2019);
- A perception that they are generally healthy (30% vs. 29%);
- A perception that they are already aware of the health risks associated with their travel plans (27% vs. 26%);
- That they are travelling to the same place(s) often (25% vs. 30%);
- A perception that there are no health risks associated with their travel plans (21% vs. 31%); and
- A lack of concern with getting sick on their trip (18% vs. 19%).

Consistent with 2019, fewer cite costs that they do not want to pay for or cannot afford (9% vs. 9%), lack of time (9% vs. 7%) or lack of available appointments (8% vs. 7%).

When it comes to reasons for not following travel health recommendations, 60% (up from 53% in 2019) cited at least one reason that prevented them from following travel health recommendations in the past.

- The risk was too low to warrant taking the advice (13% compared with 15% in 2019);
- They did not agree with recommendations (8% compared with 5%);
- Unaware of the recommendations (13% compared with 14%);
- Were worried about the side effects (11% compared with 10%); and/or
- Didn't realize their vaccination(s) expired (7% compared with 8%).

A number of international travellers cited time-related barriers such as not having enough time for the recommended vaccines or medications to take effect before their trip (9% compared with 8%), not having enough time to get the recommended vaccinations or medications (10% compared with 8%), not having enough time to see a travel health care professional or go to a travel health clinic (8% compared with 7%) and/or that there were no available appointments prior to their travel (9% compared with 5%). A few do not have access to a family physician or travel clinic where they live (7%) or do not feel safe/comfortable accessing health services (6%).

Pandemic Travel and Perceptions

Given the pandemic experience, respondents were asked in 2023 (but not in 2019) about the likelihood of undertaking activities in other countries they are visiting. Sightseeing (58%) and going to a restaurant or bar (56%) is something that a majority are very likely to do. Shopping (48%) is also very likely. There are, however, relatively few (22%) who are very likely to attend a large event. In addition, 27% are very likely to avoid places with large crowds.

Two thirds travelled outside of Canada during the pandemic and three in ten of these were very comfortable doing so and another 51% were somewhat comfortable.

International travellers are generally comfortable testing for COVID-19 when they travel (81% at least somewhat agree) and likely to take enhanced precautions (81%). They also express confidence that airlines, hotels and other travel companies are doing what is necessary to prevent the spread of COVID-19 (81%). Despite these positive views of travel, 65% at least somewhat agree that they are more likely to drive than fly when it is manageable and 52% are more likely to travel domestically than internationally in the next year.

Advertising Recall

Almost half (44%) of international travellers recall Government of Canada advertising about travel health prior to or during their travels.

The more likely places that the information was seen or heard was on social media (51%), on pamphlets posters or other signage/displays (41%), airport signage/billboards (37%), and on a flyer or brochure handed out in airports or port of entry (34%). One third of the respondents who recall an advertisement mention broad travel warning and advice. Other mentions include, COVID-19 information, vaccine promotion, and social distancing/masking advice.

Travellers to the United States

Across the survey results those who travel to the United States tend to be very similar to those who travel to international destinations that are not the U.S. This is true for overall perceptions of risk, research approach and risk mitigation behaviour.

