

# Listening to Canadians: Focus on Young Adults



Communication  
Canada

Canada



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# Introduction

The mandate of Communication Canada is to improve communications between the Government of Canada and Canadians. In so doing, it offers services and corporate communications and supports the Government's commitment to a strong and united Canada.

Within this framework, Communication Canada undertakes research on public opinion and shares the results throughout the Government of Canada to increase understanding of trends, issues, and events affecting government communications.

This report focuses on young adults under 25 years of age. Its objective is to set out some preliminary steps for improving government communications with young Canadians.

The public opinion findings are drawn from two sources:

- a survey and focus groups conducted by D-Code, a research firm specializing in young adults; and
- a distillation of results from Communication Canada surveys over the past three years.

Designed to support both the development of communications frameworks and targeted communications, the Communication Canada surveys have explored Canadian attitudes on core indicators such as optimism, government priorities and performance, familiarity with government activities, and communications preferences.

Although young adults are not a uniform group, they do share certain attitudes and beliefs. They are positive about the future and the Government, and think the Government can make a difference in their lives. However, they are not engaged on government issues, do not know much about the Government, and say government messages do not get across to them. In other words, a certain disconnect exists between the Government and young people in their day-to-day lives. Overall, while reaching them is a challenge, young adults are open and receptive to government communications.

# A Socio-economic Overview of Young Adults

## **Approximately One in Ten Canadians**

- The 18-24 age group represents approximately three million people, 10% of the Canadian population, or 12% of the adult population. (Source: Statistics Canada, 2001)

## **High Unemployment Rate**

- Youth continue to have a significantly higher than average unemployment rate.
- In September 2001, the 13.1% unemployment rate of those aged 15 to 24 was almost double the national unemployment rate of 7.2%. (Source: Statistics Canada, 2001)

## **Low Degree of Political Participation**

- Young adults lag behind the general population in political participation. According to Elections Canada, an estimated 39% of eligible voters between the ages of 18 and 24 turned out to vote in the 2000 federal elections. This compares to an overall turnout rate of 61%. (Source: Public Policy Forum, 2001)

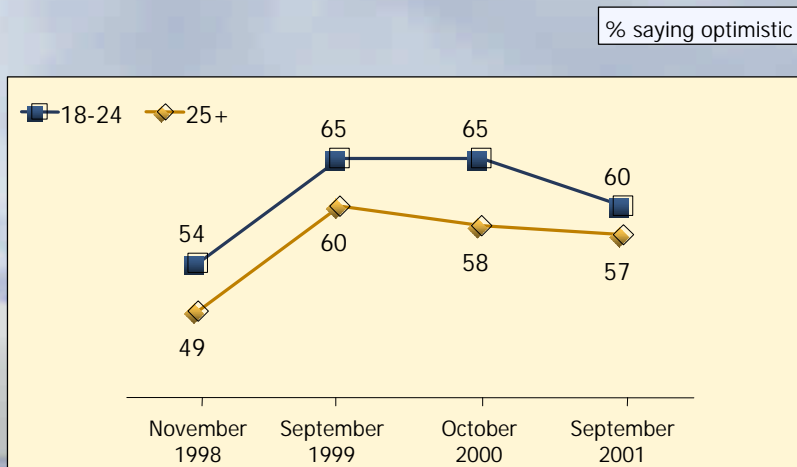
## **Volunteerism on the Rise**

- Over the 10-year period between 1987 and 1997, the rate of volunteer activity remained relatively stable among all age groups with the exception of the 15-24 age group, which saw its rate increase from 18% to 33%. In effect, then, the 18-24 generation of today is more civically engaged than its predecessors. (Source: Statistics Canada, 1998)

## Perceptions of the Country and the Government: Optimism

- Over the course of three years of Communication Canada surveys, young Canadians have registered consistently higher levels of optimism about the future of the country than have older Canadians. In the most recent survey, six in ten young adults expressed optimism.
- Young adults also exhibit higher levels of economic optimism. They are more likely than older Canadians to believe that both the economy as a whole and their personal economic futures will improve over the next year. This “optimism gap” is particularly pronounced with respect to personal economic future.

## Future of the Country



## Economic Optimism



## Perceptions of the Country and the Government: Performance of Government

- Young Canadians give high performance ratings to the Government of Canada, both on key issues and overall. Across the board, these ratings are higher than those of older Canadians.
- The higher performance ratings accorded by young adults may be due in part to satisfaction with their personal situation (as reflected in the higher degree of optimism) translating into higher approval ratings for the Government. Our research indicates the higher the degree of optimism, the higher the performance rating.



## Performance Ratings by Issue

*"How would you rate the Government of Canada's performance in each of the following areas: Please use a 7-point scale where 1 is terrible, 7 is excellent, and the mid-point 4 is neither."*  
 % giving good rating (5-7 on a 7-point scale)

	18-24 (n=515)	25+	Net Difference
Representing Canada internationally	67	57	+10
Environment	52	36	+16
Managing the economy	50	43	+7
Education	44	36	+8
Health care	44	28	+16
Unemployment	39	32	+7
Taxation	35	26	+9
Children's issues	47	32	+15
Canadian unity	54	42	+12
Crime and justice	51	33	+18
Aboriginal issues	28	25	+3
Improving the well-being of people in other countries	54	44	+10
Old age pensions	37	32	+5
Improving Canada – U.S. relations	58	51	+7
Research and development	58	46	+12

Average Net Difference: +10  
 September 2001

## Overall Performance

*"Generally speaking, how would you rate the performance of the Government of Canada? Please use a 7-point scale where 1 is terrible, 7 is excellent, and the mid-point 4 is neither good nor bad."*  
 % giving good rating (5-7 on a 7-point scale)

	18-24	25+	Net Difference
Overall performance	45	38	+7

September 2001

## Perceptions of the Country and the Government: Role of Government

- Young Canadians think the Government can make a positive difference in a range of areas. Promoting Canada internationally and protecting the environment are the top two preferred roles for the Government of Canada.
- But young people also think the Government can make a positive difference in other areas, many of which touch them directly. It appears that they envisage a meaningful role for the Government in solving problems that concern them.
- Ratings on whether the Government can make a positive difference are somewhat higher among young adults than they are among older adults. There are 12 areas where a majority of young adults think the Government can make a positive difference to a great extent, compared to nine areas for older adults.
- The areas where a majority of young adults think the Government can make a positive difference to a great extent – but where a majority of older adults do not think it can make a difference – are child poverty, youth unemployment, youth crime, and crime generally.
- The one area where a majority of older Canadians think the Government can make a positive difference – but where a majority of young adults do not think the Government can make a difference – is the well-being of Aboriginal Canadians.

## Positive Role of Government of Canada (prompted question)

*"Thinking specifically about the Government of Canada, to what extent would you say they are really able to make a positive difference in these areas?"*

*Areas where a majority of young adults (16-24) think the Government can make a positive difference to a great extent:*

- Promoting Canada internationally – 65%
- Protecting the environment – 63%
- Helping Canadians become better-educated – 62%
- Promoting knowledge and innovation – 59%
- Reducing child poverty – 58%
- Preserving the health care system – 56%
- Reducing crime and violence among youth – 55%
- Reducing youth unemployment – 54%
- Managing the economy – 54%
- Reducing crime and violence – 52%
- Reducing the debt – 50%
- Promoting Canadian unity – 50%

November 1998

## Positive Role of Government of Canada (prompted question)

*"Thinking specifically about the Government of Canada, to what extent would you say they are really able to make a positive difference in these areas?"*

*Areas where a majority of older adults (25+) think the Government can make a positive difference to a great extent:*

- Promoting Canada internationally – 65%
- Protecting the environment – 58%
- Helping Canadians become better-educated – 58%
- Reducing the debt – 56%
- Preserving the health care system – 55%
- Promoting Canadian unity – 53%
- Ensuring the well-being of Aboriginal Canadians – 52%
- Managing the economy – 51%
- Promoting knowledge and innovation – 50%

November 1998

## Communications Challenges: Breaking Through

- We have to bear in mind that government communications compete for attention. The Government must break through the clutter in order to reach Canadians. This is especially true among young adults, who are key targets for advertisers of all kinds.
- In this context, the Government's approval rankings, measured against a range of organizations and brands, stand in the middle of the pack.
- The Government ranks 18<sup>th</sup>, whether measured in terms of the percentage of young adults who say they feel very favourably towards the Government of Canada or the percentage who say they feel very favourably minus those who say they feel not that favourably.

## Approval Rankings

*"Please think of your feelings towards... I would like to know if you feel 'very favourably', 'moderately favourably' or 'not that favourably'..."*

% 18-24 saying very favourable

1. United Way	42	15. Sympatico	26
2. Coca-Cola	39	16. General Motors	24
3. Greenpeace	38	17. Hewlett-Packard	22
4. CBC	38	18. Government of Canada	22
5. IBM	38	19. CIBC	22
6. Molson	38	20. Telus/Clearnet	20
7. Bell Canada	36	21. Toyota	20
8. CTV	33	22. Shell	19
9. Nike	33	23. Globe and Mail	18
10. Volkswagen	33	24. Shaw	15
11. Labatt	31	25. Nortel	14
12. Rogers	28	26. BCE	6
13. Royal Bank	28		
14. Bell Mobility	28		

D-Code: May 2001

## Net Approval Rankings

*"Please think of your feelings towards... I would like to know if you feel 'very favourably', 'moderately favourably' or 'not that favourably'..."*

% 18-24 saying very favourable minus % saying not that favourable

1. United Way	+29	15. Hewlett-Packard	-1
2. Greenpeace	+22	16. Sympatico	-2
3. CBC	+21	17. General Motors	-4
4. IBM	+20	18. Government of Canada	-6
5. Bell Canada	+18	19. CIBC	-8
6. Molson	+15	20. Shaw	-9
7. Coca-Cola	+12	21. Telus/Clearnet	-10
8. CTV	+9	22. Shell	-10
9. Nike	+8	23. Globe and Mail	-13
10. Volkswagen	+8	24. Toyota	-14
11. Labatt	+4	25. Nortel	-16
12. Rogers	+4	26. BCE	-18
13. Royal Bank	+1		
14. Bell Mobility	+1		

D-Code: May 2001

## Communications Challenges: Awareness

- On a range of issues, young Canadians say they are less familiar with government initiatives than older Canadians are.
- Young adults express a high degree of familiarity with government initiatives on only three issues – education, health care, and crime, compared with seven issues in the case of older adults.
- Education is the one area where young adults are more aware of government initiatives than older adults.

# Familiarity with Government Initiatives

16 - 24

## **High Familiarity** (more than 50% saying extremely familiar)

- Education – 72%
- Health care – 59%
- Crime and justice – 51%

## **Moderate Familiarity** (40%-50% saying extremely familiar)

- Unemployment – 49%
- Environment – 45%
- Representing Canada internationally – 44%
- Children's issues – 43%
- Level of taxation – 42%
- Debt – 40%

## **Low Familiarity** (less than 40% saying extremely familiar)

- International trade – 25%
- Homelessness – 21%
- Farm income – 16%

September 1999; February 2000

# Familiarity with Government Initiatives

25 +

## **High Familiarity** (more than 50% saying extremely familiar)

- Health care – 67%
- Taxation – 62%
- Education – 58%
- Debt – 55%
- Representing Canada internationally – 51%
- Unemployment – 53%
- Environment – 50%

## **Moderate Familiarity** (40%-50% saying extremely familiar)

- International trade – 47%
- Crime and justice – 47%
- Children's issues – 46%

## **Low Familiarity** (less than 40% saying extremely familiar)

- Homelessness – 31%
- Farm income – 22%

September 1999; February 2000

## Communications Challenges: Relevance

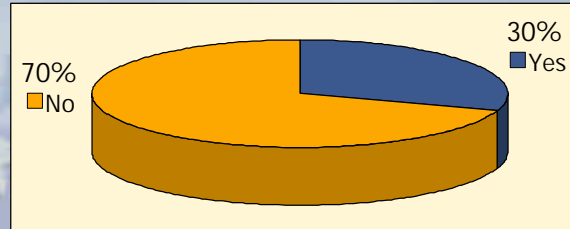
- There is a perception among young Canadians that the Government is not as relevant in their lives as it could be. They see the Government as out of touch with them. Seventy per cent do not think the Government understands what they want.
- Furthermore, when asked if the Government does a good job of communicating its programs and services for young adults, 62% of them say "No".
- Some specific communication initiatives, such as the Youth Employment Strategy, have proven successful. According to an Ipsos-Reid study conducted in 2000, there is evidence that all of the Youth Employment Strategy ads "...had a positive impact on awareness and attitudes toward government initiatives in the areas of access to education and youth employment."\*
- But, overall, the Government must do a better job of choosing *what* it communicates to young adults, *how*, and *where*.

\* *Quantitative Post-Test of HRDC Youth Advertising Campaigns: Final Report*, p.31  
Submitted to: Human Resources Development Canada, January 2000



## Government's Understanding of Young Adults

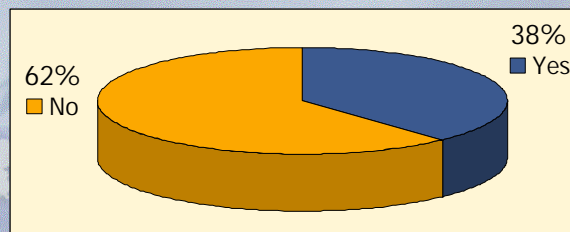
*"Do you think that the federal government understands what is desirable to young adults?"*



D-Code: May 2001

## Communicating with Young Adults

*"Does the federal government do a good job at communicating its programs and services aimed at young adults?"*



D-Code: May 2001

# Reaching Young Canadians: What

- Starting with the *what*, government communications must reflect the needs and interests of young Canadians: they need to know the Government is providing services that are relevant and of benefit to them.
- Our surveys show that the topics young adults most want to hear about are finding a job, acquiring skills and learning, and health care.
- More recent focus groups suggest young Canadians also want to hear about national security issues, Canada's role in the international conflict, and race relations. Indeed, in the aftermath of the events of September 11, survey data show that national security has emerged as an important issue, second only to health care as the top-of-mind issue among young adults.
- Young Canadians' other key concerns are education and the economy, issues that are also a major concern for older Canadians. However, 18 to 24-year-olds are slightly more likely to mention national security and education, and slightly less likely to mention health care and the economy.
- Focus groups suggest that young Canadians are very concerned about possible racism and discrimination facing visible minorities in Canada in the aftermath of September 11: they want the Government to play a role in promoting tolerance. Young Canadians strongly value cultural diversity and are more likely than older Canadians to rate cultural diversity as an important factor contributing to a sense of Canadian identity (75% vs. 67%).

## Topics of Interest

September 2000

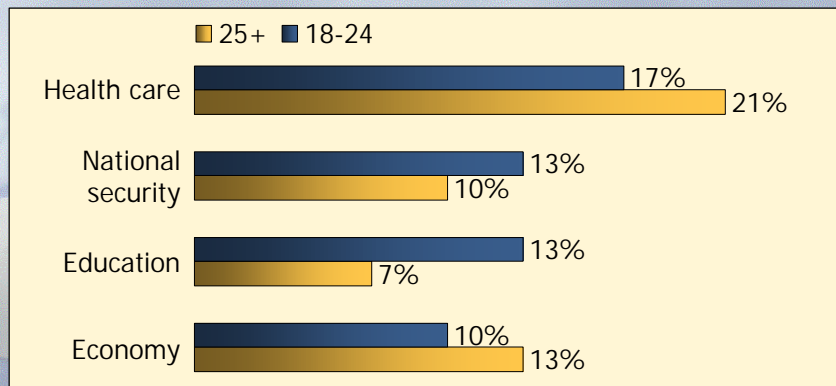
- Finding a job
- Access to post-secondary education
- Health care
- National security
- International affairs
- Race relations

D-Code: November 2001

## Top-of-Mind Issues

(unprompted question) Post-September 11

*"Thinking about the issues facing Canada today, which one would you say the Government of Canada should focus on most?"*



September 2001

# Reaching Young Canadians: How

- In addition to getting the *what* right, another ingredient in successfully communicating with young Canadians is mastering the *how* – image, style, and messaging. In focus groups, they say they want a Government whose image is:
  - innovative and forward-looking – that embraces change;
  - approachable and accessible – that has a human face; and
  - honest and transparent – that acknowledges there is room for improvement.
- And this image must be projected over time and across departments to become ingrained.
- Young adults tell us that government ads must grab their attention. Nice and bland will not do; nor will facts alone. They want advertising that appeals not only to their intellect but also to their emotions by using, for example, music, striking visuals, and humour.
- At the same time, in focus groups, young people say they want government ads to be genuine. If the offering is not believable, they will simply not pay attention. To achieve authenticity, they suggest that we should:
  - use real people their age showing how a government program or service has benefited them personally;
  - involve young adults in developing communications; and
  - associate our messages with individuals or groups they admire; in other words, use credible spokespersons.
- However, they consider one-time ads designed to be “cool” as phony.

## Desired Traits

Young adults wish the Government of Canada were more:

- innovative and forward-looking
- approachable and accessible
- honest and transparent.

D-Code: November 2001

## Advertising to Young Adults

- Young adults want Government of Canada ads to be attention-grabbing.
- Young adults want Government of Canada ads to be genuine.

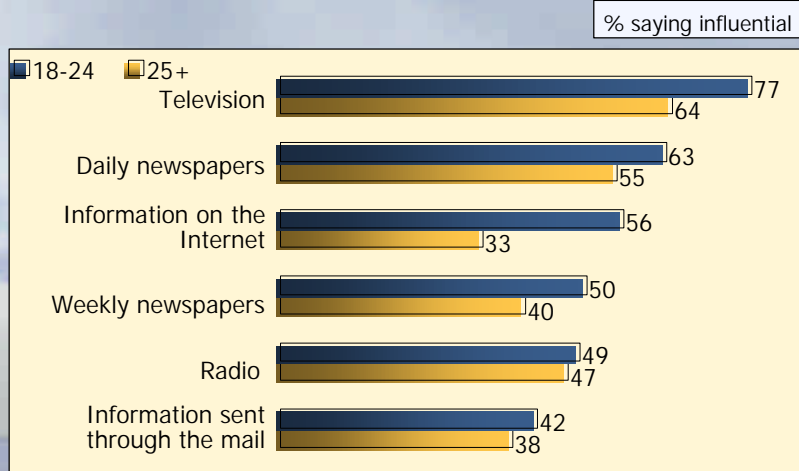
D-Code: November 2001

## Reaching Young Canadians: Where

- *Where* can young adults be reached?
- There are various vehicles to impart messages. Young Canadians, products of the Information Age, are more likely than older Canadians to say that communications media – television, newspapers, the Internet, radio, and mail – are influential in shaping their overall impression of the Government of Canada.
- The relative influence of the Internet on young adults is particularly strong. When asked about their primary source of Government of Canada information, young adults accord the greatest prominence to the Internet. After the Internet, their main source of information is television.

## Influence of Media

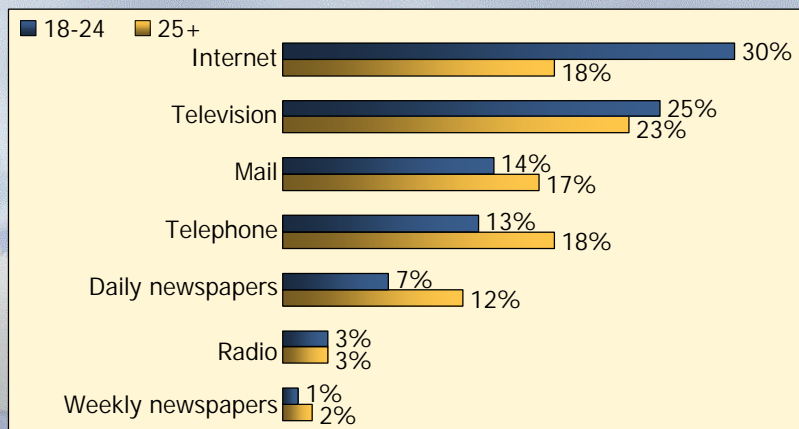
"I'd like you to tell me how influential each of the following are in shaping your overall impression of the Government of Canada."



September 2001

## Primary Sources of Information

"What would you say is the primary way by which you currently get information from the Government of Canada?"



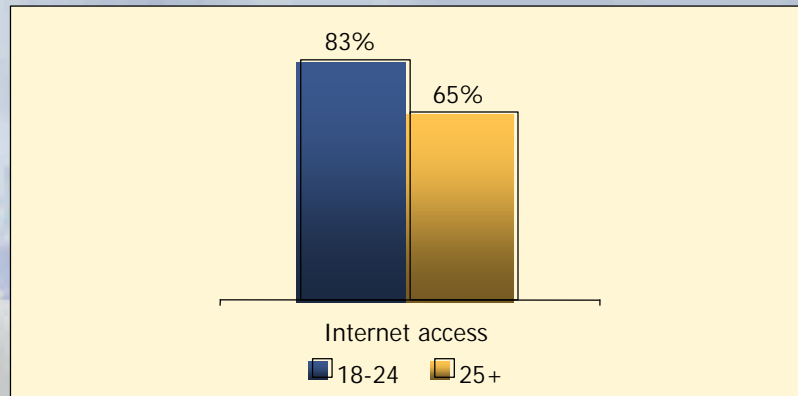
September 2001

## Reaching Young Canadians: Where

- Young adults are on the cutting edge of the Internet revolution. They are the most wired of demographic groups. Over eight in ten have Internet access, compared to over six in ten older adults.
- Of those who have Internet access, an equal percentage of younger and older Canadians (slightly over half) had visited a Government of Canada website in the three months before the most recent Communication Canada survey.



## Internet Access

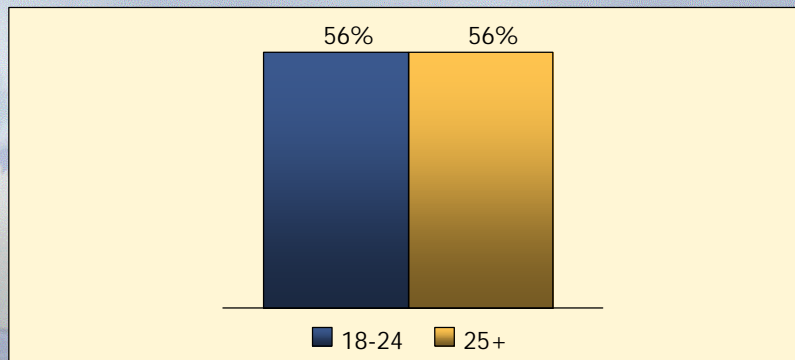


September 2001

## Visits to Government of Canada Websites

*"Have you visited any Government of Canada websites in the past three months?"*

(Question posed only to respondents who had used the Internet in the three months prior to the survey)



September 2001

# Conclusions

## Communications Checklist

- ✓ Be relevant
  - e.g. communications on tolerance
- ✓ Get their attention
  - e.g. striking visuals
- ✓ Be real
  - e.g. involve young adults in the development of communications
- ✓ Be consistent
  - adopt a single, targeted Government of Canada image
- ✓ Be sustained
  - repeated exposure
- ✓ Be where they are
  - use diverse communication channels, but
  - concentrate on the Internet

To communicate successfully with young Canadians, therefore, it is important to:

- communicate about what matters to them, such as race relations in the post-September 11 environment;
- break through the advertising clutter and grab their attention;
- be genuine in ads by, for example:
  - using spokespeople young adults admire;
  - telling real stories from people their age; and
  - involving them in the conception, design, and production of ads;
- project an image of the Government that is consistent and sustained: it takes time and repeated visibility to ingrain a credible image; and, finally,
- use a variety of media, with an emphasis on the Internet.

# Methodology

Table 1 presents the detailed statistical information for the quantitative surveys included in this report.

**Table 1**

	Sample (under 25)	Margin of error* (under 25)	Total sample (only 18-34 surveyed)	Margin of error* (total sample)
D-Code, May 2001	443	4.8%	1,000	3.2%
	Sample (under 25)	Margin of error* (under 25)	Sample (25+)	Margin of error* (25+)
Communication Canada, September 2001	515	4.4%	4,125	1.6%
Communication Canada, May 2001	528	4.4%	4,086	1.6%
Communication Canada, October 2000	506	4.4%	4,145	1.6%
Communication Canada, February 2000	440	4.8%	4,293	1.5%
Communication Canada, September 1999	515	4.4%	4,115	1.6%
Communication Canada, November 1998	539	4.3%	3,053	1.8%

\* At 95% confidence level

Note that the definition of the under-25 age group varies slightly. For the three earlier Communication Canada surveys, it comprises 16-24 year-olds; for the three most recent Communication Canada surveys as well as the D-Code survey, the definition of young adults encompasses only those individuals between the ages of 18 and 24.

Table 2 provides background information on the qualitative focus groups with individuals aged 18-24. These focus groups were conducted by D-Code.

**Table 2**

Location	Date	Details
Winnipeg	November 5, 2001	Two discussion groups held; one with students, one with workers. Each discussion group had 6-8 participants.
Montréal	November 6, 2001	
Toronto	November 7, 2001	