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Continuous Qualitative Data Collection of Canadians' Views – May 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 14 online focus groups which were conducted between May 6th and 28th, 2020 in multiple locations across the country including in the Atlantic region, 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 and reopening stages were beginning. The research explored a wide range of related issues in depth, from perceptions of the federal government's response to date, to the degree of personal impact the virus had on Canadians, discussion around the use of face masks, views on economic impact of the virus, and discussions with key subgroups around the impact on students, airlines and orphan wells (in Western groups). Throughout the month, various messages and taglines and one set of advertising concepts aimed at communicating with the public about COVID-19 were tested.

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 students, parents, unemployed (due to COVID-19), and those stressed about isolation

Detailed approach

- 14 focus groups across various regions in Canada
- Groups were conducted with the general population in Small Town Quebec, Lower Mainland British Columbia (BC), Saskatoon, Quebec City, Rural and Small Town Prairies and Halifax
- Groups were conducted with key subgroups including students in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) - 905 and Greater Montreal Area (GMA), parents in Interior BC and Rural Quebec, those stressed about self-isolation in Ontario Major Centres and Calgary, and those unemployed due to COVID-19 in Atlantic Major Centres and Ontario Mid-sized Centres
- 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, 94 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
GTA – 905	1	English	May 6	4:00-6:00 pm	Students	7
Greater Montreal Area	2	French	May 7	4:00-6:00 pm	Students	8
Major centres Ontario	3	English	May 12	5:30-7:30 pm	Stressed about self-isolation	8
Interior BC	4	English	May 13	7:00-9:00 pm	Parents	5
Major centres Atlantic Canada	5	English	May 14	4:00-6:00 pm	Unemployed (Covid-19)	7
Small-town Quebec	6	French	May 14	7:00-9:00 pm	General population	6
Lower Mainland BC	7	English	May 19	7:30-9:30 pm	General population	8
Rural Quebec	8	French	May 20	4:00-6:00 pm	Parents	8
Saskatoon	9	English	May 20	7:00-9:00 pm	General population	6
Calgary	10	English	May 21	7:30-9:30 pm	Stressed about self-isolation	7
Mid-sized centres Ontario (outside of GTA)	11	English	May 26	4:00-6:00 pm	Unemployed (Covid-19)	6
Quebec City	12	French	May 26	5:30-7:30 pm	General population	4
Rural and small-town Prairies	13	English	May 27	7:00-9:00 pm	General population	7
Halifax	14	English	May 28	4:00-6:00 pm	General population	7
Total number of participants						94

Key Findings

COVID-19 in the News (All Locations)

Participants were following the news about COVID-19, but not as closely as in previous months. They were beginning to find the news somewhat repetitive and it was clear from their responses that a certain degree of 'issue fatigue' was occurring. Participants noted that they felt overwhelmed by the volume of news on this topic.

While continuing to track cases of COVID-19 in their respective regions and provinces, interest among participants had turned toward the timelines for reopening and associated challenges. In some regions, early reopening was already underway and certain parts of the country were well ahead of others. Regardless of the stage at which a particular area was at, participants were concerned about the dangers of a second wave and advised a cautious approach. Another concern centered on the availability of personal protective equipment (PPE) and what was being done to implement workplace health and safety protocols, especially as some participants were imminently returning to work. This is a topic that participants indicated they had not yet heard much about, but there was keen interest among some.

Although engagement with the topic was lower overall, participants had heard about a number of issues, in addition to reopening, including a breakthrough on a possible vaccine, the treatment of seniors in long-term care facilities (specifically in Quebec), and how well some regions were doing in combatting the virus in comparison to other jurisdictions both within and outside Canada.

Participants accessed news and information on COVID-19 from a wide range of media. Social media dominated, particularly among the younger demographic, although many were obtaining news via Facebook, Twitter, podcasts and online news aggregators. At the same time, there continued to be heavy reliance on television news and, in some particular areas, talk radio. Word-of-mouth was also a key part of the mix, with many participants claiming to have shared information with colleagues, friends and family members, have received updates from their employers or, in the case of students, representatives of an academic institution.

Government of Canada's Response to COVID-19 (All Locations)

For the most part, when asked what they knew of recent responses by the Government of Canada to the COVID-19 crisis, few participants could name any specific initiatives top-of-mind. However, with some prompting some recollection was evident on issues such as benefits for students, programs targeted to volunteers, paid sick leave, funding for landlords, guidance on face masks and sector-specific initiatives such as additional pay for essential health care workers.

Many commented positively on the Government of Canada's response to the pandemic, indicating that, given the unprecedented nature of the crisis, the Government had been quick to roll out a range

of financial supports and other initiatives. Any criticism tended to center around specific issues such as the border not being closed early enough in the initial stages of the pandemic or the equity of financial aid being distributed to various groups.

Personal Impact (All Locations)

The proportion of participants who had been personally touched, directly or indirectly, by the coronavirus remained relatively low, in the order of one or two participants in each group. A few mentioned being fairly sure they had the virus before it became more widely known, having been tested for it, knowing someone else who had contracted the virus, or being aware of someone who had passed away as a result of COVID-19, typically an older acquaintance or family member.

Most were well versed on the steps to take in the event they developed the symptoms of the virus. A common response was that they would quarantine themselves as a first line of defense. Some would call their physician or tele-health, while others indicated they would seek testing. A few participants, particularly those in Interior BC and Saskatoon, made reference to accessing an online self-assessment tool developed. Participants in these groups were mainly referring to an app developed by their respective provincial governments, although some in Saskatoon also knew of the Covid-19 Self-Assessment Tool on the Government of Canada website.

Behaviour Changes (Major Centres Ontario Stressed, Interior BC Parents, Major Centres Atlantic Unemployed, Small Town Quebec, Lower Mainland BC, Rural Quebec Parents, Saskatoon, Calgary, Mid-Sized Centres Ontario Unemployed, Quebec City, Rural/Small Town Prairies, Halifax)

As in March and April, participants continued to modify their behaviours in response to the pandemic in ways that had varying degrees of impact on their lives. Most commonly, participants were adapting to:

- Home isolation and physical distancing – This practice continued mainly unchanged through May, although some participants were beginning to get outside more as the weather improved across Canada. For many, the daily routine involved working, parenting, exercising and cleaning. And, most continued to leave their homes with relative infrequency, for work, to run errands or for exercise. As they were heading into the second or third month of isolation, some were finding the lack of social connection quite challenging. Fatigue appeared to be setting in, and some participants spoke about the effect this was having on their psyche as well as their patience. Nevertheless, most were continuing to adhere to the practice as well as to social distancing, although there was clear evidence of a desire to resume more regular interactions with friends and other family members.
- Work – Those who continued to work were adapting to working remotely, while others not working were adjusting to a slower rhythm of life and appreciated having additional time to connect with other members of their household. Others, who had lost their jobs prior to COVID-19, were concerned about limited job prospects.

- Sanitary precautions – Participants were regularly washing their hands and applying hand sanitizer among other precautions, including attempting to consciously refrain from touching surfaces such as cell phones, door knobs and items they on store shelves.
- Masks – A few participants commented on wearing a face mask, although this was not the norm.
- Shopping – Participants spoke about changes to their shopping habits, principally that they avoided having to go out other than for essentials.

Parenting through COVID-19

Parents were feeling some degree of stress adapting to the challenges of online home-schooling or child care, particularly for those who continued to work. In some cases, parents and children have faced a fairly steep learning curve with respect to the technology required to assist their children with school assignments, as well as in creating a structured, organized daily routine. For a number of parents, their early intentions to impose a more regular schedule on their children had in recent weeks become more relaxed. Some remarked that their children were becoming increasingly bored by the isolation and the monotony of their daily routine.

While most parents indicated that they had had frank conversations with their children about COVID-19 and its impacts, as well as the need for social distancing, some were worried that their children were exhibiting signs of anxiety and alarm. Few parents mentioned any specific tools or resources that might assist them, although it was clear that many could benefit from support in a number of ways: homeschooling, building structure in the day, activities and entertainment options, etc. Parents' comments suggested a desire for some relief which they felt would best be addressed by the resumption of school and opening of child care facilities, once it was safe to do so.

Personal Inconveniences (All Locations, except Interior BC Parents and Halifax)

Having to self-isolate was associated with many inconveniences, some more major than others. The most significant was the inability to spend time with family members outside the immediate household. The absence of school and the shift to online classes as well as home-schooling was another issue for students in post-secondary as well as children, youth and parents. The loss of employment for some, managing work and family responsibilities, and the challenges associated with undertaking what were previously simply everyday tasks were also mentioned by participants as were the cancellation of key life events and travel plans. General fear, anxiety, boredom and uncertainty were feeding into some degree of malaise expressed by a number of participants.

Impact across Communities (All Locations, except Lower Mainland BC and Quebec City)

COVID-19 is viewed as impacting communities of different sizes in different ways although participants could not say definitively whether their counterparts in smaller, more rural communities - or vice versa - were generally better off than their own area. There was, however, general agreement that practicing social distancing is more difficult for those living in higher density, large urban areas compared to smaller communities which usually have easier access to spacious outdoor areas. Some mentioned that residents of smaller towns tend to know their neighbours better and, as a result, can be more

trusting. This has the effect of lowering stress levels when it comes to personally interacting with neighbours and other residents in the area. By contrast, the congestion which is common to dense downtown cores in larger centres was seen as making pedestrian traffic somewhat less navigable, while also adhering to social distancing.

Face Masks (Mid-Sized Centres Ontario Unemployed, Quebec City, Rural/Small Town Prairies, Halifax)

Participants were generally aware of guidance from public health officials to wear face masks in situations where it may be difficult to maintain the recommended two metre physical distance. Moreover, they understood that the masks were primarily a means of preventing the spread of COVID-19 to others, rather than of protecting one's self.

Overall, the impression was that face masks were effective in limiting the spread of COVID-19, although participants in Halifax were, at least initially, somewhat less convinced of this. Some confusion about the guidance on face masks was evident in the discussions. Participants commented about the difficulties sourcing face masks, knowing which ones were more effective than others, and expressed concerns about improper use.

While many claimed to wear a face mask regularly, participants indicated that they used a mask mainly when shopping rather than at all times in public, as well as at work or when visiting elderly family members. Those who indicated they were disinclined to wear a face mask offered a number of reasons, ranging from the practice not being mandatory to concerns that masks were in short supply.

Most participants supported the Government of Canada advice to wear a homemade, non-medical face mask when it is not possible to consistently maintain a two-metre physical distance from others. These participants felt that making masks mandatory could pose some challenges, and likened this to the issue of smoking in that many people would choose not to follow the advice whether it is mandated or recommended. Moreover, they felt that government should also supply face masks to everyone if the decision was made to make them mandatory.

However, others felt it did not go far enough, commenting that the government should either mandate face masks or, at a minimum, communicate the importance and benefits of doing so. The primary concern among these participants was that, if the Government positioned wearing of face masks as a recommendation, many people would simply ignore the advice.

Reopening (Lower Mainland BC, Rural Quebec Parents, Saskatoon, Calgary, Mid-sized Centres Ontario Unemployed, Quebec City, Rural/Small Town Prairies, Halifax)

Focus groups in the latter part of May coincided with a decline or flattening of the number of cases of COVID-19 in many parts of the nation, and increased discussion of reopening plans. At this time a limited number of jurisdictions were already moving into the early stages of reopening.

Many participants welcomed the prospect of reopening, but were also quite anxious, wanting to ensure that federal and provincial governments did so cautiously and in a gradual manner. Some worried that, with reopening, people may let their guard down, taking a more relaxed approach to key measures to limit the spread of COVID-19, particularly with respect to social distancing.

In Ontario, the gathering at Trinity Bellwoods Park in Toronto, which received extensive media coverage, sparked concerns among participants in that province that warmer weather and pent-up desire for social gatherings would combine to create the conditions for further spread of the virus and a possible second wave. In other locations, participants viewed this period as an 'experiment,' anticipating the possibility of having to shift back and forth between lockdown and reopening modes, should there be a spike in infections.

Most participants indicated they were not yet ready to venture out more regularly into public spaces. Some also expressed concerns that employers, including their own, may not be ready to reopen, lacking sufficient protocols to ensure the safety of their workers, including having personal protective equipment (PPE) on hand.

Economic Impact (All Locations, except GTA Students and GMA Students)

Government of Canada Economic and Financial Incentives

Participants were widely aware of various initiatives by the Government of Canada to combat the economic impact of COVID-19. There was a generally positive assessment of the Government's approach to handling this crisis, specifically in that government was seen as moving quickly to roll-out a suite of programs intended to support businesses, workers and other groups affected by the pandemic.

The vast majority of participants were aware of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), mostly because they had applied for the benefit themselves, or knew of someone who had. Some acknowledged being slightly confused about some aspects of the program, specifically questioning the degree of coordination between the CERB and Employment Insurance (EI).

Awareness of the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS) was more variable across groups, compared to the CERB. This was primarily a factor of personal relevance, as some participants were more or less directly affected by the program or had looked into the criteria and application process for their own businesses. The details of this program were, as a result, not as clear as they were for the CERB. And, some participants commented that the program included many qualifiers and caveats that made it difficult for organizations to ascertain their eligibility.

Participants were also asked about their awareness of and views on support for seniors. While most participants, across all groups, had heard something about this, save for a very few, they were unclear on the details. Initial views on the program were mixed to negative. Concerns were expressed about the timing of the program which was seen to be late in coming, relative to programs directed at other groups. Additional concerns were raised by some as to whether and why seniors even needed this program, while others expressed an opposing view, commenting that the amount being offered was

insufficient, especially as seniors had contributed through their taxes over a lifetime of working. There was also a particular concern about low income seniors and those who may not have adequate financial resources in their retirement. Even when given more information about both the payment and additional funding for low-income seniors (i.e., through OAS, GIS and HST/GST credits), participants were unmoved from their initial positions about the relative fairness or unfairness of the seniors' benefit.

Managing Budget Deficits

Most participants supported continuation of these programs (CERB and CEWS, etc.) and, while concerned about the growing deficit as a result, felt that the Government had little choice at this time. The primary concern had to be keeping businesses and people from financial ruin. And, they understood that the uncertainty in dealing with this type of unprecedented crisis meant governments had little to no previous history to draw from.

At the same time, many were troubled by the heavy financial burden that was being placed on future generations on whose shoulders the responsibility would be to pay down the deficit. Others expressed some apprehensions about possible tax increases or spending cuts in other areas which could adversely affect themselves or other vulnerable groups and key programs, such as health care. In the end, however, most felt comfortable with deficit spending.

Thinking ahead, as the economy reopens, participants were of the view that as economic activity returns to previous levels, the government could look to a gradual scaling back of benefits. Some were motivated by concerns that these supports may act as disincentives for people to return to work. Others suggested that the programs will need to continue for some time given that some industries or sectors are unlikely to rebound quickly. In these instances, they recommended that financial support programs should be modified so that they can be more targeted to those most in need, while reducing any disincentive to return to work.

There was no real consensus around how long it may take for the economy to regain full momentum and, therefore, the anticipated duration of financial support programs. Some volunteered that they should remain in place for a minimum of another two months while others took a longer view, noting that the programs may need to remain until a vaccine is available.

Economic Stimulus and Planning for Recovery

The general consensus across the series of focus groups held in May was that some kind of stimulus would be required to drive the economy forward. Many weren't sure what form this should take. Some supported infrastructure spending and immediate job creation, while others viewed this time as an opportunity to invest more strategically in areas such as digital innovation, technology and green initiatives. But, a number of participants did underscore that the most important goal was to get through the pandemic, get people back to work and then begin to think about the kind of economy Canada should be building for the future.

When thinking more about specific goals for the economy, participants reviewed and commented on a series of descriptions that could describe the type of economy Canada could be aiming for:

- Future-proof economy
- Green economy
- Healthy economy
- Modern economy
- Resilient economy
- Strong economy

Participants converged around the idea of a 'resilient economy.' The term was viewed not only as encompassing the notions of 'strong' and 'healthy,' but also as connoting adaptability, especially in turbulent and uncertain times.

Participants were presented with three phrases that could be used by the Government of Canada to frame its plan for the economy moving forward: Recovery, Restart and New Start. Preferences varied across the groups, but generally coalesced around 'New Start' and 'Recovery.' The former term suggested an opportunity for a reset and specifically an opportunity to consider different approaches and focuses for economic development and growth, while the latter term denotes a return to normal and a degree of continuity in economic activity. Most participants felt that 'Restart' suggested going backwards rather than forwards, and presumed the economy had come to a full stop, and thus did not select this as their preferred framing.

Other Challenges

While participants were, especially given the focus of this discussion, principally preoccupied with the economic challenges facing Canadians and Canadian businesses, other issues were raised in connection with the pandemic that several felt should be addressed. A number of participants specifically focused on the issues pertaining to seniors and long-term care, particularly around the vulnerability of this group in terms of succumbing to the virus and the apparent lack of preparedness to deal with COVID-19 in some long-term care facilities. Other issues included education (i.e., online learning), stress and anxiety, and the impact on Canada's health care system, among others.

Message Testing (GTA Students, GMA Students, Major Centres Ontario Stressed, Interior BC Parents, Major Centres Atlantic Unemployed, Small Town Quebec)

Participants reviewed and discussed messages or statements related to public health guidance. Across the groups, it was clear that certain of the statements were clearer and more impactful than others, and were deemed to include information that was felt to be important to disseminate publicly.

Important Information

Three key pieces of information were viewed as important to include in federal government messaging around COVID-19: measures/practices to continue (such as physical distancing, frequent handwashing, staying at home as much as possible (especially if ill) and avoiding crowded places), education on asymptomatic transmission and the fact that the virus was still a threat, even though some provinces were re-opening.

Across all groups, the following four messages were selected by participants as containing vital information which should be widely shared:

- “Continue to practice the critical measures to limit the spread of COVID-19: physical distancing, frequent handwashing, and staying home if you’re sick.”
- “Most people infected with COVID-19 experience mild symptoms, but they can still pass the disease on to others. We need to protect seniors and the most-vulnerable members of the community by staying home as much as possible, and avoiding crowds and places where adequate physical distancing is not possible.”
- “If you suspect you have illness due to COVID, get tested. This will help us identify any outbreaks in the community and put in place measures to prevent further spread.”
- “COVID-19 remains a serious health threat. While some restrictions are being loosened, it is important to recognize that things can get worse again if we don’t all follow the current restrictions in place. Stay up to date with the latest rules and restrictions for your area by visiting Canada.ca/coronavirus regularly.”

Motivating and Compelling

Messages that were the most motivating, in terms of following public health advice, spoke to personal responsibility or included a social responsibility factor. In some instances, suggesting negative consequences if people did not follow public health guidance was also viewed as effective.

Among the three groups in which this question was asked, Anglophones and Francophones differed in their focus. English participants from Interior BC and Atlantic Canada coalesced around the message: “COVID-19 remains a serious health threat. While some restrictions are being loosened, it is important to recognize that things can get worse again if we don’t all follow the current guidelines in place. Frequently wash your hands, avoid crowded places, and practice physical distancing.” By contrast, those who participated in the group held among residents of small towns in Quebec chose the following message as the most compelling: “Don’t be responsible for the spread of COVID. Frequently wash your hands, avoid crowded places, and practice physical distancing.

Participants generally preferred messages that were clear, direct, straightforward, and included practical suggestions of how to limit the spread of the virus. Some also liked messages that spoke to the general public, rather than to more narrow subgroups of people.

Dislikes

While there was a lot of positive feedback on these statements, some phrases or terms were viewed with a more critical eye. For example, thanking Canadians, which introduced one of the statements that was tested (“Thank you ...”) suggested to some that the pandemic was over. Along these lines, participants were generally more critical of statements or phrases that downplayed the severity of the virus (“mild symptoms”), came across as accusatory in nature (“Don’t be responsible for the spread of COVID”) or suggested that those with a “healthy lifestyle” would be less susceptible to contracting the virus. At the time of the groups, participants felt there was a lot of confusion and misinformation

around the effectiveness of masks, so any statements that discussed the use of masks were also questioned in terms of credibility.

Guidance Testing (Major Centres Ontario Stressed)

In the group held with participants drawn from major centers across Ontario, a series of examples of short messages were shown to participants pertaining to guidance the federal government could provide related to COVID-19. Participants were asked to choose which messages they felt were easiest to understand and most likely to catch their attention, as well as those they disliked.

Two messages were identified clearly as the easiest to understand, because they were viewed as simple, direct and to the point:

"Do your part. Wash hands, keep apart and stay home if sick."

"It takes all of us: Clean your hands, keep a safe distance and stay home if sick."

Messages that caught the attention of participants were those that specifically referenced "COVID," rather than simply incorporating more generic statements, as well as one which included the idiomatic expression ("Easy as 1-2-3") which was somewhat lyrical and, therefore more memorable, or were formatted in a question/answer style ("Sick? Stay home.").

Overall, participants tended to dislike any messages that included phrasing such as "staying healthy" or "Take Care Canada" which were viewed as cliché and meaningless.

Tagline Testing (Interior BC Parents, Major Centres Atlantic Unemployed, Small Town Quebec)

Participants in a select number of groups were shown a series of taglines that the federal government could include at the end of COVID-19 related advertisements. Overall, three taglines were clearly preferred.

"Let's all do our part" – This tagline was preferred, overall, by both English and French participants, because it suggested that every person had a responsibility to do their part, for the broader community.

"Protect yourself and others" – This surfaced as the second most preferred option by Anglophones, for many of the same reasons as the previous.

"Restons forts (Let's keep going strong)" – Francophones in small town Quebec also favoured this tagline, which was not translated for discussion in the English groups.

The least preferred taglines were *"All of us, all the way"* (shown in all groups) and *"Be safe out there"* (only shown in small town Quebec).

Asked what key points the taglines were trying to get across, participants generally agreed they were attempting to convey a message of both individual responsibility, but also a sense of community in Canadians are acting in a united way to combat COVID-19.

Website Testing (Lower Mainland BC, Rural Quebec Parents, Saskatoon)

The Canada.ca/coronavirus website was reviewed in three groups, with the objective of gauging participants' perceptions of the site and their intention to revisit the site in the future.

Prior to being asked to visit the website before the group, a small number of participants had already visited the website on their own to obtain information on or apply for various benefits (such as the CERB, EI or CEWS), monitor the current number of COVID-19 cases, learn more about the virus and safe practices, or obtain travel-related information. Those who had not previously visited the site said they were not inclined to do because they were already feeling overwhelmed with information from various other sources.

When reviewing the website prior to the discussion, most had perused the site without any particular goal or objective and simply moved from topic to topic. Overall, their interests mirrored some of the topics noted above. Many participants found most, or at least part, of what they were looking for and said the information on the site was generally clear, well organized, informative, and covered a wide range of topics in extensive detail. At the same time, some felt the high volume of information available resulted in an overly dense layout, given the amount of text and hyperlinks included.

While overall perceptions were generally positive, intentions to revisit the website varied with just as many stating they would, as would not.

Impact of COVID-19 on Students (GTA Students, GMA Students)

Perceptions around Virus and Re-opening

Asked if they believed the virus was under control in Canada, students' responses differed by location. All students in the GTA group agreed that Canada was doing a good job, while GMA students held the opposing view – as they believed that the public was not following directives and were concerned about the number of deaths in long-term care facilities at the time.

As these groups were held early in the month, questions were asked to gauge students' views on the country beginning to reopen. While there was no definitive response, most were hesitant and erred on the side of caution advocating to wait a while longer, such as a September or October timeframe to begin re-opening. They had a clear view that public health advice should remain paramount to reopening.

Online Learning and Return to Campus

The impacts of COVID-19 varied from student-to-student, particularly depending on their stage in terms of their university or college experience. In general, students reported facing challenges with the transition to online learning. Although they appreciated the flexibility of their classes being online, overall they missed the sense of collegiality, it was difficult for some who preferred a more hands-on learning style, and they believed it somewhat devalued their education. Asked if they expected to be able to return to campus in the Fall, most did. Students continuing in college or university were looking forward to returning to an in-person environment.

Effect on Employment and Financial Stressors

Many summer jobs that students had lined up prior to the pandemic had become interrupted and any prospects for summer employment were few and far between.

Those who completed their degree in the spring had clear concerns around lack of employment and future job prospects. There was a perception that while managerial positions were available, entry level positions had vanished. Unemployment was a source for both financial and developmental stress for some. While students from the GTA did not generally report experiencing any financial stress, those in the GMA did, suggesting they had concerns around paying their tuition, bills, and rent.

Views on Government of Canada Response and Supports for Students

Awareness of the Canada Emergency Student Benefit (CESB) was high, with almost all students recalling hearing about it through the Prime Minister's press conferences or the news media. Most were aware of the details of the program and could approximate what they would be eligible for, however, virtually none knew the process of applying for the benefit. With regards to changes to the Canada Student Loans and Grants program, awareness was higher among GTA students and more limited in the GMA student group.

Overall, most students believed that the Government of Canada was doing enough to help students and limited top-of-mind suggestions were brought forward in terms of any additional supports needed. When shown a list of initiatives to help students during the COVID-19 pandemic, most suggested that creating summer job placements would make the biggest difference to them personally, but that creating an emergency student benefit (of \$1250 per month) would make the most difference for students more broadly.

Airlines (GTA Students, GMA Students)

In both groups with students in Toronto and Montreal, participants discussed the idea of the Government of Canada providing financial aid to industries affected by COVID-19. Across the two groups, there was little consensus from students as to whether this was something that should be provided. A few participants cited small businesses, more generally, as a sector they thought could be helped during the pandemic.

When asked about the airline industry in particular, most students believed that they should not receive any additional financial aid. While students generally understood there would be an impact to airline companies in terms of decreased travel during the pandemic, they did not prioritize their needs. In fact, many believed that there would be an increase in demand for both personal and business travel following the pandemic. None of the participants had had to cancel a flight, and while they favoured refunds being issued by airlines to Canadians who had to cancel flights, they were also supportive of issuing credit vouchers if offering full refunds could bankrupt the airlines.

Orphan Wells (Saskatoon, Calgary)

Relatively few participants had heard about the issue of orphan wells. Those who were more familiar with the issue had a fairly clear understanding of its origin and, once given more information, all participants generally understood its significance, particularly with respect to its impact on the environment. There was also a sense, in Calgary specifically, that site remediation could be a job creator, employing many people who are now out of work in the oil and gas sector in the province. At the same time, most were unaware of any activity currently underway to address the issue.

Nevertheless, the general consensus was that this is an important issue. Although most felt the costs of reclamation should be underwritten by the companies which have abandoned them in the first place, many understood that governments would need to step in as these companies no longer have the financial resources to cover the costs.

At the same time, participants felt that companies should be required to provide a 'recovery' or security deposit prior to being given a license to operate in the sector which could then be used to finance the cost of remediating an abandoned site. Most were of the opinion that companies must abide by certain environmental rules, which are part of the regulatory regime. And, if they cannot, they should not be permitted to operate in the province.

Other Government of Canada Services (Lower Mainland BC, Rural Quebec Parents)

Asked if participants had needed to access any non COVID-19 related services from the Government of Canada recently, most had not. One participant in Lower Mainland BC discussed using passport services and in rural Quebec a couple of participants mentioned contacting the Canada Revenue Agency in regards to income taxes and child benefit calculations. However, overall these participants did not report any particular concerns in using these services.

Other Federal Government News and Issues (Major Centres Ontario Stressed, Interior BC Parents, Major Centres Atlantic Unemployed, Small Town Quebec, Lower Mainland BC, Rural Quebec Parents, Saskatoon, Rural/Small Town Prairies)

Asked if they had heard recently about any federal government issues unrelated to the pandemic, most participants had not. A few, across the groups, mentioned the prohibition of certain firearms,

pipelines affecting Indigenous communities and the (automatic) increase in Member of Parliament salaries.

When probed on firearms, asking specifically about the Government of Canada's recent announcement on the prohibition of over 1500 models of assault-style firearms in Canada, awareness was modest with the topic coming up unprompted in the groups in major centres in Atlantic Canada, Lower Mainland BC, and rural Quebec. Opinions on the announcement varied. While a few believed prohibition was a good step, more were critical, suggesting the topic could require further public discussion and communication of the rationale for the decision. Others were generally lacking knowledge of the details or specifics of the situation and refrained from providing comment.

Participants were split in their views on the focus on COVID-19 by the Government of Canada. On balance, while many felt that the focus was appropriate, given the severity of the situation and the global impact of the virus, others felt the media attention on the pandemic was a bit too much, especially in the groups held towards the end of the month.

MORE INFORMATION

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