



Canadian Radio-television and
Telecommunications Commission

Conseil de la radiodiffusion et des
télécommunications canadiennes

Exploring attitudes towards Wireless Public Alerting System in Canada

Executive Summary



Prepared for the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission

Supplier name: Kantar

Contract number: EP363-140002/020/CY

Contract value: \$108,805.29

Award date: February 7, 2020

Delivery date: January 15, 2021

Registration number: POR 097-19

For more information on this report, please contact the CRTC at: ROP-POR@crtc.gc.ca

Ce rapport est aussi disponible en français.

Canada 

Executive Summary

Research Purpose and Objectives

As part of a Wireless Service Providers (WSPs) participation in Canada's National Public Alerting System (NPAS), the CRTC requires WSPs to distribute wireless emergency alerts on their LTE networks. This means that all WPA-enabled wireless devices, connected to LTE networks, will receive a test or alert, warning Canadians in an affected area of imminent or unfolding hazards to life.

Included in the WSP's obligation to participate in WPA, is the requirement for WSPs to also participate in a campaign to educate and create awareness among wireless users about the new WPA feature in the larger National Public Alerting System. In the Telecom Decision CRTC 2018-85, the CRTC set out an expectation that WSPs send a minimum of one SMS text message in 2018 and one in 2019 to notify their LTE customers that they will receive test alerts in regions where such tests are being issued.

Although NPAS testing over broadcasting mediums has been occurring since 2015 and WSPs promoted the WPA in 2018 and 2019, actual emergency wireless alerts, as well as the yearly test alerts, continue to generate a number of complaints to various alerting stakeholders. The nature of complaints received following actual or test alerts indicates that individuals hold a range of sentiments towards the system and the way in which it currently operates. In some cases, there appears to be some confusion with respect to who owns, operates, and regulates NPAS. For these reasons, the CRTC has interest in assessing the public's general understanding, sentiments and satisfaction with respect to the NPAS.

Further, complaints to date suggest Canadians are not aware of the existence of WPA or that such alerts could be received by their mobile devices. The lack of knowledge among wireless users about the existence of WPA's addition to the NPAS is of concern to the CRTC.

The research was designed to address the following objectives:

- Understand Canadians' awareness of WPA and WPA testing;
- Assess whether the current regulatory mechanisms in place for creating awareness of both the WPA and the related yearly visible test alerts are effective and sufficient, and if not, whether alternative or additional regulatory measures are needed;
- Determine satisfaction with the way WPA alerts have been issued; both for Imminent Threat to Life alerts and Amber Alerts;
- Understand Canadians' sentiment towards the NPAS system, how it is currently being used, and its importance to Canadians;
- Identify Canadians level of knowledge with regard to the purpose and conditions associated with alerts issued through the NPAS;
- Solicit Canadians' feedback on how Amber Alerts are issued and received, including the following:
 - Mandatory reception,
 - Size of the area of distribution, and
 - Sound/alarm settings;
- Anticipate issues that the public may have on the Canadian NPAS capability.

Summary of Findings

National Public Alerting System

The majority of Canadians are aware of Canada's National Public Alerting System (NPAS; 86%). Most are aware that the system includes Amber Alerts (87%) and natural disasters (forest fires, tornadoes, or chemical spills; 74%), though many also erroneously believe the NPAS issues boil water or air quality advisories (41%). Canadians have a clear understanding of the importance of a NPAS, as close to nine-in-ten say the system is very important (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale; 86%). However, satisfaction is slightly muted, with only 60% saying they are very satisfied with the system (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale).

Wireless Public Alerts

The vast majority of Canadians (96%) recall receiving a Wireless Public Alert at least once in the past 12 months. Most say that they received this alert via their cellphone (92%), and fewer recall an alert on TV (31%) or radio (24%). Thus, it follows that most Canadians are aware that they can receive emergency alerts on their cellphone (97%). However, only half of Canadians (51%) are aware that only compatible devices connected to an LTE can receive alerts, signaling an opportunity for education.

Awareness of cellphone alerting is largely driven by the alerts themselves, with two-thirds of Canadians (62%) becoming aware of cellphone alerts by receiving one. Other notable sources of awareness include TV (11%), radio (8%), being notified by a wireless service provider (7%), news (6%), and social media (3%).

Most Canadians are satisfied with Wireless Public Alerts (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale; 75%). While the ability to send out cellphone alerts are generally regarded as a beneficial feature of the NPAS (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale; 89%) and alerts are rated as clear and easy to understand (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale; 95%), fewer Canadians (58%) believe the cellphone alerts they receive are relevant to them. This may be due to the size of distribution area, as the primary stated reason for Canadians' dissatisfaction with alerts is that they did not apply to their area (44%).

Despite some dissatisfaction with alert relevance, few Canadians feel they have received too many alerts in the past year (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale; 9%) and a majority agree that bi-annual tests are the right amount (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale; 69%). Further, few say that they would like the option to opt-out of cellphone alerts completely (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale; 15%). Therefore, these results suggest that dissatisfaction with cellphone alerts does not stem from a desire to receive fewer alerts or the inability to opt-out of alerts, but rather the distribution areas being too broad.

Amber Alerts

Satisfaction with Amber Alerts exceeds that of the NPAS generally, with most (83%) Canadians saying they are satisfied with Amber Alerts (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale). Further, most agree that Amber Alerts are important for ensuring the safety of children (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale; 93%).

Among those who are dissatisfied with Amber Alerts, the primary cause of dissatisfaction is that the alert does not apply to their area (35%). Other notable causes of dissatisfaction included not receiving the alert at all (18%) and the alert sounds waking them up (18%), being too loud (7%), or not knowing how to turn the alert off (7%).

Despite dissatisfaction with alert distribution areas for both the NPAS and Amber Alerts, most Canadians believe that Amber Alerts should remain province or territory-wide (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale; 79%) and that Amber Alerts should be received by everyone, even if they are inconvenient (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale; 86%). Thus, public sentiment for Amber Alerts appears to be in favour of child protection over the inconvenience of alerting. As a result, there is limited support for the ability to opt-out of alerts (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale; 16%).

Demographic Differences

A number of additional demographic and subgroup analyses were also undertaken, including age, gender, region, satisfaction with the NPAS, and recipient of past 12-month alerts. Differences were noted in the following areas:

Age:

Canadians aged 16-54 differ from their older 55+ counterparts in a number of ways:

- Younger Canadians (16-54) are less likely to be aware of the NPAS than Canadians aged 55+ (84% vs. 87-92%);
- Younger Canadians (16-54) are more likely to recall receiving an alert on their wireless device (94% vs. 88-89% among 55+), while Canadians 55+ are more likely to recall seeing an alert on TV (40-53% vs. 18-28% among 16-54-year-olds).

Gender:

Women generally view the NPAS, WPA, and Amber Alerts more favourably. Differences between genders include:

- Women are more likely than men to rate the NPAS as important (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale; 91% vs. 81%);
- Women are more likely to be satisfied with the NPAS than men (65% vs. 55%);
- Satisfaction with WPA is higher among women than men (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale; 80% vs. 70%);
- Women are more likely to rate WPA alerts as important than men (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale; 90% vs. 84%);
- Women are more likely to agree that two tests per year is “just right” (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale; 72% vs. 65%); and,
- Women are more likely than men to believe Amber Alerts are important for ensuring the safety of children (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale; 95% vs. 91%).

Region:

The regions tested included the Prairies (Manitoba, Alberta, and Saskatchewan), the Atlantic provinces (Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, and PEI), and the Territories (Northwest Territories, Nunavut, and Yukon). Regional differences exist on most measures of NPAS, WPA, and Amber Alerts, including:

- Ontarians report receiving more alerts and tend to be less satisfied with WPA in general, while those in the Atlantic region view WPA more favourably. Differences include:
 - Ontarians are more likely to have become aware of cellphone alerts by receiving one (70%) compared to those in Quebec (57%), Atlantic provinces (54%), Prairies (54%), or Territories (39%);
 - Ontarians are less satisfied with cellphone alerts (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale; 70%) than those in the Atlantic Provinces (86%) or Quebec (80%).
 - Ontarians are less likely to find cellphone alerts relevant (1 or 2 on a 7-point scale; 19%) compared to those in Quebec (8%), BC (8%), the Atlantic provinces (6%), Prairies (11%) or Territories (7%).
 - Ontarians are more likely to think they receive too many cellphone alerts (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale; 12%) compared to those in BC (5%), the Prairies (4%), or the Atlantic provinces (4%);
 - Ontarians are more likely to be aware of Amber Alerts (94%) than those in Quebec (87%), British Columbia (72%), the Atlantic provinces (82%), and the Territories (77%);
 - Those in Ontario are less likely to agree that Amber Alerts are important for child safety (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale; 91%) compared to those in Quebec (96%) and the Atlantic provinces (98%).

This is likely tied to the number of alerts Ontarians say they receive and lower perceived relevance of these alerts.

- Notably, those in the Territories are less likely to say they received an alert in the language of their choice (7 on a 7-point scale; 71%) compared to those in Quebec (79%), Ontario (85%), British Columbia (76%), the Atlantic provinces (87%), or the Prairies (87%).

Past 12-month Alerts:

Canadians who have received an alert in the past 12 months generally view the system more favourably and are better informed about the NPAS, WPA, and Amber Alerts. More specifically, those who recall an alert are more likely to:

- Be satisfied with the NPAS (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale; 74% vs. 0%);
- Rate the NPAS as important (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale; 90% vs. 55%).
- Agree cellphone alerts are a good feature of the NPAS (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale; 92% vs. 67%); Agree that two tests per year is “just right” (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale; 73% vs. 51%); and,
- Be satisfied with Amber Alerts (89% vs. 46% among those who do not recall an alert).

Strategic implications

The results of this research suggest that most Canadians support the NPAS, including WPA and Amber Alerts. The research also provides information to be considered for future updates to regulatory measures:

1. Strong awareness of WPA and support for bi-annual tests suggest that the current regulatory measures are successful. However, lower awareness among younger and middle-aged Canadians (16-54) suggests that further education and awareness campaigns may be necessary for this cohort. Given that younger Canadians are less likely to use TV or radio as a source of information, education should come from WSPs or wireless alerts themselves.
2. The receipt of an alert in the past 12 months is positively correlated with most aspects of NPAS, WPA, and Amber Alert approval. This again suggests that alerts themselves are a useful tool in public education. However, care must be taken to ensure the purpose of the alert is clearly stated (e.g., tests) so that Canadians understand the role and relevance of these alerts.
3. Despite most dissatisfaction seeming to stem from a wide distribution area and therefore limited relevance of alerts, minimal support exists for allowing Canadians to opt out of alerts entirely. There is strong support for province or territory-wide Amber Alerts, even among those who say they receive too many alerts, suggesting that child safety outweighs any perceived inconvenience. However, geographic targeting for all alert types will likely decrease the number of complaints received by the CRTC.

Methodology

A telephone survey was conducted among 1,400 Canadians, aged 16 years and older, who have a wireless device connected to a wireless service provider.

The sample consisted of a national random probability sample of cell phone numbers. Kantar utilized random digit dialling (RDD) for the sample frame that includes cell phone numbers. The RDD approach ensures that all cell numbers are given an equal probability of being selected thereby minimizing sampling bias. Random sampling will also provide representation among subscribers to various WSPs, Indigenous communities, Anglophone and Francophone markets, and a variety of demographics including age, gender, education and disability.

A pre-test consisting of 10 completed English interviews and 10 completed French interviews was undertaken on April 15, 2020. Changes were made to question wording for clarity and to reduce survey length. As a result, these interviews were excluded from the final data set. The survey was in field from November 26 to December 13, 2020.

A sample of 1,400 members of the general population 16 years and older will provide a confidence interval of +/- 2.6%, 19 times out of 20.

Contract Value

The total contract value for the project was **\$108,805.29** including applicable taxes.

Statement of Political Neutrality

I hereby certify as a representative of Kantar 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.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tanya Whitehead". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.**Tanya Whitehead**

Kantar

Senior Director, Public Practice Leader