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Attitudes to the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) Report

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Canada 

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This Public opinion research report presents the results of a telephone survey of 1,204 Canadians between February 1-17, 2021.

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français sous le titre : Attitudes du public à l'égard du Service canadien du renseignement de sécurité (SCRS)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background and Methodology

CSIS is Canada's national security intelligence service. Its mandate and authorities are defined in the CSIS Act. CSIS investigates threats which may, on reasonable grounds, be suspected of posing a threat to the security of Canada. One of CSIS' organizational objectives is to strengthen the trust and confidence of its stakeholders through the delivery of valuable results, and continued lawfulness and privacy protection.

As such, the primary objective of this research study is to measure public views towards CSIS (including levels of trust in the organization) against baseline measurements obtained in 2018 in order to shape communications strategies and to help measure their success.

The methodology for this study involved a bilingual, probability-based telephone survey of Canadians. In order to increase the proportion of younger Canadians (i.e. 18-34) in the sample, EKOS incorporated cell phone numbers into the sample.

In total, 1,204 Canadian adults aged 18 and over responded to the survey (594 landline respondents and 610 cell phone respondents). The margin of error associated with the total sample is +/- 2.8 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. All data were statistically weighted by age, gender, and region to ensure the sample's composition reflects that of the actual population of Canada according to Census data. The field dates for the survey were February 1-17, 2021.

Survey Findings

Outlined below are key findings from this study. The remainder of this report describes survey results in more detail. Where available, results are tracked to the CSIS baseline survey conducted in 2018.

Attitudes to Security and Privacy

Respondents were asked about how safety in Canada has evolved over the past five years. Six in ten (60 per cent) feel that Canada is no more or less dangerous than it was five years ago. Among those who suggested a shift, the lean is towards a more dangerous outlook, with one-quarter (25 per cent) saying that Canada has become more dangerous. Thirteen per cent believe that Canada has become a safer place over the past five years. Interestingly, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, Canadians' views on how dangerous the country has become have remained largely stable since 2018.

Survey results reveal moderate public trust in intelligence agencies, but also highlight the public's concerns when it comes to the amount of private information that these organizations hold. Roughly half of Canadians agree that the federal government can be trusted to strike the right balance between security and civil liberties (56 per cent), and that Canadian intelligence agencies act within the law when collecting information about Canadians (49 per cent). Four in ten (41 per cent), however, expressed concerns about the information that intelligence agencies collect on them, and five in ten (52 per cent) disagree with the idea that police and intelligence agencies should be given additional powers to ensure security if it means curtailing personal privacy safeguards.

Tracking reveals that the proportion of Canadians who say they trust the federal government to strike a balance between security and civil liberties has remained largely stable since 2018. However, there has been a five point decrease in the proportion who feel Canadian intelligence agencies act within the law when they collect information about Canadians, and a six point decrease in agreement that police and intelligence agencies should have more power to ensure security if it means Canadians have to give up some personal privacy safeguards

Familiarity with CSIS

Results suggest relatively limited awareness of CSIS. Respondents were asked, unaided, if they could name the organization that is responsible for investigating threats to Canada. Just three in ten (34 per cent) were able to identify the organization as CSIS, and six in ten (60 per cent) were unsure. These results are largely the same as those found in 2018.

Respondents were then given a brief description of CSIS and asked whether they had heard of the organization. While top-of-mind awareness of CSIS is quite low, results suggest that most Canadians are aware of the organization, even if they can not identify it by name. Six in ten (57 per cent) say they have heard something about CSIS, while an additional nine per cent believe they 'may' have heard something. One-third (32 per cent) do not recall seeing or hearing anything about the organization. Again, these results have remained largely stable over the past three years.

Attitudes to CSIS

Results reveal that although awareness of the organization may be fairly low, Canadians place a great deal of importance on CSIS' role in protecting Canada against terrorism and espionage threats. Seven in ten (68 per cent) rate CSIS' mission as very important, while a further one in four (25 per cent) say it is somewhat important. Virtually no respondents (four per cent) believe that the responsibilities borne by CSIS are of little to no importance. These results have remained stable since 2018.

Results also reveal broad public confidence in CSIS. Consistent with 2018, more than eight in ten Canadians (84 per cent) indicate confidence in the organization, although the bulk of these individuals (63 per cent) expressed only 'some' confidence.

Echoing the findings in the previous section, survey results reveal wide-ranging trust in CSIS. Consistent with 2018 results, eight in ten Canadians (80 per cent) place at least some trust in CSIS' ability to safeguard Canadians' rights and freedoms, although most (63 per cent) say they 'somewhat' trust the organization.

Respondents were presented with a list of three examples of how CSIS has protected Canadians from terrorism and espionage and asked how each one would impact their support for CSIS' activities. All three examples increased support for CSIS: nine in ten Canadians feel that they would be more likely to support CSIS upon learning that it has assisted in preventing acts of terrorism within Canada (90 per cent), that it has prevented suspected terrorists and spies from immigrating to Canada (86 per cent), or that it has caught foreign spies attempting to steal classified information (88 per cent). There has been a modest increase in support for CSIS activities based on the information provided in all three of these examples.

Despite high levels of trust in CSIS (and reflecting privacy concerns discussed earlier in the report), Canadians strongly prefer that CSIS err on the side of transparency rather than secrecy in its operations. Fully seven in ten respondents (69 per cent) believe that, while some level of secrecy is may be necessary, Canadians should know more about the information that CSIS collects. Only three in ten (27 per cent) feel the benefits of secrecy outweigh the risks. These results have remained largely stable since 2018.

Threat Environment

The survey also included a number of new questions examining Canadians' views on various threats to the country. When asked whether they were more concerned about religiously motivated violent extremism (RMVE) or about ideologically motivated violent extremism (IMVE). Results reveal that Canadians are somewhat more concerned about ideologically motivated extremism. More than half (53 per cent) express concern about IMVE, while three in ten (33 per cent) are more concerned about RMVE.

Respondents were then asked whether they were more concerned about espionage against classified government information or about economic espionage against Canadian companies. Results reveal somewhat mixed views on this issue. Half (50 per cent) feel that espionage against Canadian companies is more of a concern, and a similar proportion (42 per cent) feel that espionage against government is the greater concern.

Canadians were also asked to rank different threats to national security. Results reveal that, among the issues examined, respondents place cyber-attacks against critical infrastructure as the highest threat to national security (33 per cent). Terrorism (25 per cent) is seen as the second highest threat, followed by foreign governments trying to manipulate policies and outcomes in Canada (22 per cent). Terrorists and spies entering Canada, and espionage against government and Canadian companies are seen as lower level threats to national security.

Finally, respondents were presented with a list of selected countries and asked to rank them based on their threat to Canadian interests. A clear majority (58 per cent) see China as the biggest threat to Canada, followed distantly by Russia (18 per cent), North Korea (10 per cent) and Syria (4 per cent).