

BACKGROUND

People and their Natural Environment A National Survey of Canadians

*Commissioned by The Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation,
in collaboration with the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM)*

Purpose:

Prior to the 10th annual Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation Conference (November 21-23, 2013), the Environics Institute for Survey Research conducted a national survey of Canadians covering the Foundation's four defining themes, one of which is "people and their natural environment." To what extent do Canadians consider environmental issues to be a major national concern, who do they hold most responsible for the pollution we all experience, and how does it impact our health?

Highlights:

- It is broadly assumed that Canadian's concerns about environmental issues such as climate change are real but secondary to more pressing worries about the economy and jobs. Results from this survey find this to be the case with respect to what the public sees as the top problems facing the country today. At the same time, environmental concerns emerge as the most salient public priority (ahead of the economy and jobs) when the focus is on future challenges to Canada that can and need to be addressed.
- In terms of what poses the greatest threat to the environment in Canada, the public is more likely to point a finger at industry (which manufactures products and waste that pollute) than at consumers (who purchase, consume and dispose of what industry produces). Since 2010, Canadians are less likely to place the culpability on themselves as consumers, and more likely to view the responsibility as equally shared by consumers and industry.
- Nine in ten Canadians believe that environmental pollution affects their own personal health at some level, but a declining minority (now one in six) feel these effects are significant. This group is most likely to include the most vulnerable segments of the population (e.g., low income earners and immigrants)
- Canadians believe that air pollution is by far the most salient form of environmental risk to the public's health, followed by water pollution, climate change and toxic chemicals. About half of Canadians believe air pollution, chemical pollution and pesticides in food represent major risks to public health, and one-third place climate change in this category. These environmental threats are seen as less likely to pose a major risk than such lifestyle hazards as obesity and heart disease, but more serious than weather-related hazards associated with major flooding, heat waves and extreme cold weather, or the hazards associated with pandemic flu epidemics and tap water.

Research Findings in Detail

ENVIRONMENT AS A SALIENT ISSUE FOR CANADIANS

1. What is the most important problem facing Canada today? What do you think will be the most serious problem facing Canada in the future if nothing is done to address it?

The conventional wisdom is that public concerns about environmental issues are real but in the end remain secondary to greater concerns about jobs and the economy. The survey demonstrates that this is true with respect to how Canadians view problems today, but reveals a different result when the focus shifts to problems that require attention in the future.

When asked to identify the most serious problem facing Canada today (unprompted, that is without being offered responses to select from), Canadians are most likely to mention the economy (including interest rates, recession) (24%), followed by unemployment (12%), and then poor government leadership (11%). Environmental problems (including pollution and climate change) come fourth on the list (8%), followed by such issues as health care, immigration/refugees, and poverty. These results are comparable to previous national surveys conducted over the past several years (most recently the Environics Institute 2012 Focus Canada survey).

<i>What is the most important problem facing Canada today?</i>	%
Economy/interest rates/recession	24
Unemployment	12
Poor government/leadership	11
Environment/pollution/climate change	8
Health care	7
Immigration/refugees/racial issues	4
Poverty/hunger/homelessness	3
Deficit/public debt	3

<i>What do you think will be the most important problem facing Canada in the future if nothing is done to address it?</i>	%
Environment/pollution/climate change	20
Economy/interest rates/recession	15
Unemployment	10
Health care	8
Immigration/refugees/racial issues	4
Poor government/leadership	4
Deficit/public debt	4
Aging population	3

The survey included a second question asking what people think will be the most important problem facing the country in the future if nothing is done to address, yielding a different result. When asked this way, environmental issues rise to the top of the list (20%), followed by the economy (15%) and unemployment (10%), and then health care, immigration/refugees and poor government leadership. This finding reveals that the environment is in fact a highly salient issue for Canadians when the focus shifts from the present to the future, and to problems that can and should be addressed. This same distinction has also been found in comparable surveys conducted in the USA and Sweden.

Canadians' opinions about the country's most important problems vary somewhat across the country. Quebecers are more likely than others to emphasize the economy and the environment; in the latter case especially when looking to the future. Ontarians and Atlantic Canadians are among those most apt to emphasize unemployment as a present day problem, but to a lesser extent as a future one. Placing an emphasis on the environment as the top problem for the future is also most evident among Canadians with a university degree, those 30 to 59 years of age, and immigrants from Europe/the USA.

GREATEST THREAT TO THE ENVIRONMENT

2. *Some people say the greatest threat to our environment comes from industry, which produces chemicals and waste that threaten our air, water and soil. Other people say the greatest threat to our environment comes from consumers, who buy, use and dispose of the products that industry produces, and have certain lifestyle expectations. Which of these views is closer to your own?*

There is no public consensus about who is most responsible for environmental problems, but Canadians as before are more likely to point the finger at industry (45%) than consumers (33%), while a small but growing minority (17%) insist that both industry and consumers are equally culpable.

Views on this question have changed little since 2005 (based on previous Environics Research surveys), but since 2010 there has been a notable shift away from consumers being seen as primarily responsible (down 6 percentage points), and toward the view of an equally shared responsibility (up 7 points). This trend suggests that Canadians are not rejecting their own collective role in damaging the environment through their consumption, but at the same time are less likely than before to let industry off the hook.

<i>Which is the greatest threat to our environment . . .</i>	2005 %	2007 %	2010 %	2013 %
Industry, which produces chemicals and waste that threaten our air, water and soil	48	48	48	45
Consumers, who buy, use and dispose of the products that industry produces, and have certain lifestyle expectations	40	35	39	33
Both equally (<i>volunteered response</i>)	11	15	10	17

Across the country, industry is most widely seen as being the greatest threat among Atlantic Canadians and Quebecers, and Canadians with lower incomes. Consumers are more widely identified as the problem by residents of the three Prairie provinces, and by those with higher levels of education and income. Torontonians are among those most apt to insist that both industry and consumers are equal threats to the environment, but this view has increased among most segments of the population (excepting residents of Atlantic Canada and Quebec).

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS ON HEALTH

3. *How much, if at all, you believe environmental problems now affect your own health?*

Most Canadians believe that environmental pollution and hazards affect their own health to some extent, but a declining minority feel the impacts are significant. One in two say the environment affects their health a great deal (16%) or a fair amount (32%), while a similar proportion believe the environment affects their health not very much (40%) or not at all (11%). Perceptions of impact have declined noticeably since 2011 (when six in ten felt their health was affected at least a fair amount), and are back to levels recorded in 1992 (based on previous Environics Research surveys).

<i>How much do you believe environmental problems now affect your own health . . .</i>	1992 %	2001 %	2011 %	2013 %
A great deal	18	28	25	16
A fair amount	34	39	35	32
Not very much	36	27	30	40
Not at all	11	5	9	11

Perceptions of health impacts are generally similar across the country, but somewhat more evident among Montrealers (59% say a great deal or a fair amount), and least so among Manitobans (38%). More relevant perhaps is the finding that perceptions of health impacts are more widespread among the most vulnerable groups within society (low income earners, immigrants from outside Europe/the USA, and allophones); unlike other Canadians their views have not declined since 2011.

4. *What environmental problem or hazard would you say poses the greatest risk to the health of Canadians? What other environmental problems or hazards pose a significant risk to people's health?*

What sort of environmental hazards are understood by Canadians to represent a hazard to people's health? When asked (unprompted), almost nine in ten can identify at least one such hazard, and some identify two or more. At the top of the list is air pollution/smog (42%), followed by water pollution (29%), global warming or climate change (14%), toxic chemicals (13%), food safety issues/contamination (8%) and industrial pollution (7%), followed by numerous others (each mentioned by no more than 5%). These findings are notably consistent with previous surveys conducted by Environics and others over the past few decades. Since 2008, mention of air pollution/smog has declined, while water pollution, global warming, toxic chemicals and food safety have all increased modestly.

<i>What environmental problem or hazard poses the greatest risk to the health of Canadians? What other environmental problems or hazards pose a significant risk to people's health? (open-ended).</i>	%
Air pollution/smog	42
Water pollution	29
Global warming/climate change	14
Toxic chemicals	13
Food safety/contaminated food	8
Pollution – general	7
Industrial pollution	7
Drinking water pollution	5
Indoor air quality/indoor air pollution	5
Municipal garbage/landfills	5
Genetically modified foods	5
Oil and gas extraction/fracking	5

Across the country, air pollution/smog is most likely to be identified as a significant health risk by Torontonians, while water pollution is emphasized by Canadians with the most education and income, and climate change is emphasized by Quebecers.

5. Please tell me whether you think each of the following poses a major risk, a moderate risk, a minor risk, or no risk at all to the health of Canadians.

Canadians were also asked to rate the risk of 12 potential health hazards related to the environment, lifestyle and weather events. Consistent with a previous survey (conducted in 2008 for Health Canada), a majority of Canadians believe that many of these hazards pose at least a moderate health risk, but there is a wide range in the extent to which they are seen as representing a major risk.

<i>Potential risks to the health of Canadians</i>	Major risk %	Moderate risk %	Minor/No risk %
Obesity	66	25	7
Heart disease	55	35	8
Chemical pollution	53	35	11
Air pollution	49	39	11
Pesticides in food	48	38	17
Second hand smoke from tobacco	40	34	26
Climate change	33	38	28
Major flooding of rivers	21	40	38
Pandemic flu epidemics	19	39	40
Heat waves	15	44	40
Tap water	13	24	62
Extreme cold weather	7	27	65

The widely-known lifestyle-related health hazards of obesity (66% say a major risk) and heart disease (55%) are at the top of the list, followed by environmental hazards including chemical pollution (53%), air pollution (49%), pesticides in food (48%), second-hand smoke (a form of localized air pollution) (40%), and climate change (33%). By comparison, no more than one in five consider as a significant health hazard major flooding of rivers (21%), pandemic flu epidemics (19%), heat waves (15%), tap water (13%) or extreme cold weather (7%).

The relative ordering of hazards has held largely the same since 2008, but perceptions of major risk have declined in the cases of second-hand smoke (down 17 percentage points), air pollution (down 13), pandemic flu epidemics (down 10) and heart disease (down 10).

Survey Methodology

The results are based on a telephone survey conducted for the Environics Institute by Research House with a representative sample of 1,501 Canadians (18 years and older) between September 17 and October 13, 2013. The sample was stratified by province and community size to ensure adequate coverage of jurisdictions for analysis purposes. A sample of this size will produce a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 2.5 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. The margin of error is greater for results for regional and socio-demographic subgroups of the total sample.

The survey questions were designed by the Environics Institute, in conjunction with representatives from the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation and the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM).