

SOCIAL NORMS IN CANADA RESEARCH 2020-21

Building metrics to promote Covid-19 preventive behaviour

RESEARCH PROSPECTUS

Context

The Challenge. The Covid-19 global pandemic is the most significant global public health threat in the past century. Infections and deaths have spread to almost every corner of the earth, stressing (if not overwhelming) health care systems, shutting down economic activity at a level not witnessed since the 1930s, and sequestering most citizens within their homes for months on end.

Effective management of this pandemic requires that citizens observe a prescribed set of preventive and protective behaviours, such as social distancing, hand-washing, staying at home, and in some cases complete self-isolation. This strategy is effective only to the extent there is widespread, if not universal, compliance by everyone across the population. Governments and public health officials have been communicating continuously to ensure that citizens understand what is to be done and why it is important. But there are limited means by which to regulate and enforce compliance; in the end success relies on individuals' willingness to adopt the necessary regimen, and to continue doing so over an extended (and uncertain) period of time. Knowing what actions to take is a necessary first step, but accepting the importance and/or necessity of adopting them, and then maintaining the practice over time requires a personal commitment that is just as important for compliance. Critical to this process are the normative social pressures – or social norms – that inform people about how they should behave in such situations.

Why social norms matter. Social norms matter because people's behavior is strongly influenced by others they know and care about – through explicit and often subtle social pressures to conform to what is and is not acceptable or appropriate behaviour in particular situations. Such norms are well entrenched but can change over time, and sometimes as a result of intentional efforts. One of the most striking examples involves the successful campaign to change in social norms around smoking. Just a generation or so ago, smoking was the sign of the sexy, interesting maverick; today it has become effectively “de-normalized” as inconsiderate and self-defeating. Regulatory measures that restrict smoking are essential but it is the norms more than laws that govern behaviour (by contrast, consider jaywalking – also legally forbidden but socially accepted and rarely sanctioned).

Social norms have been shown to play a key role in the dynamics of many forms of health-related behaviours, such as exercise, blood donations, condom use, and alcohol consumption. Newly-published research has provided fresh evidence that social norms have a crucial influence on the adoption of Covid-19 preventive behaviours among Americans. This suggests that well-established social norms may be an essential requirement for effective management of the current pandemic, as well as future ones to come.

Most Canadians are currently adopting the necessary Covid-19 preventive behaviours. But compliance is by no means universal, and cannot be taken as a given over time as people become increasingly eager to revert to pre-pandemic routines. Social norms around such behaviours represent an important public health indicator that can be used effectively by public health authorities to monitor current conditions and identify where new interventions may be needed (e.g., to strengthen normative pressures).

This project will be the first in Canada to establish population-based metrics for social norms as they pertain to Covid-19 preventive behaviours. It will provide the foundation for ongoing monitoring, and support the development of strategies that strengthen positive norms and de-normalize negative ones.

The Research

The Environics Institute for Survey Research and its partners are planning a landmark research project to map selected social norms in Canadian society pertaining to Covid-19 behaviours. The research will provide empirical measures of the norms in terms of their overall strength and their distribution across the population (e.g., by region, community size, demographic characteristics). It will serve as the foundation for future research to identify how social norms are evolving over time, as well as provide a methodology for more in-depth focus within specific communities, population subgroups, and organizations.

Once social norms are clearly defined and measurable, strategies can be formulated around ongoing monitoring and interventions where needed. Because this research will break new ground, it presents a tremendous opportunity for demonstrating leadership in developing the knowledge required for effectively addressing the challenges of achieving widespread and ongoing compliance that is essential for the country's public health.

Methods. The research will consist of a national survey with a representative sample of 3,000 to 5,000 Canadians (aged 18 plus), plus oversamples of specific populations as resources permit and in collaboration with research partners. Key to the value of the research will be the application of a well-established model for defining and measuring social norms.

Timetable. The study will be conducted over a four month period, commencing once the project funding is in place. Once completed, the results of this research will be publicly released through media partnerships, followed by targeted outreach to organizations by sector.

Budget. The total budget is \$60K – \$85K (*with the range reflecting options for population coverage*).

Partnership and Sponsorship Opportunities

The Institute is a not-for-profit organization, and is seeking research investment partners and sponsors to help support the initiative. Partnership is open to organizations who want to contribute their relevant expertise and actively collaborate on all phases of the research. Sponsorship is invited from organizations that support the study objectives and provide a financial contribution toward the research costs.

Being involved from the outset offers a unique opportunity to demonstrate leadership in this critical challenge facing society. Benefits of participation include:

- Full recognition as a Partner or Sponsor
- Input into research design and scope
- Full participation in the public release
- Pre-release briefings and access to all data and analysis

For more information:

Keith Neuman, Ph.D., Environics Institute (416) 272-6628 or keith.neuman@environics.ca

The Environics Institute for Survey Research is a not-for-profit organization that conducts original public opinion and social research related to issues of public policy and social change. The Institute's primary mission is to survey those not usually heard from, using questions not usually asked. Survey research - properly conducted and published - helps all of us better understand our world as it is today, how it's changing, and where it may be heading. For more information, see www.Environicsinstitute.org
