

DATA DIVE WITH NIK NANOS

The 'yahoo minority,' a dire outlook and changes in consumerism: Where we stand on COVID-19

Polling suggests most Canadians are fine with politicians taking a cautious approach to reopening the country. But the data also hint at lasting social and economic casualties as we grapple with significant human ones

OPINION

Nik Nanos is the chief data scientist at Nanos Research, a Global Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington and the official pollster for The Globe and Mail.

When anti-lockdown protestors showed up at Queen's Park demanding businesses be reopened, Ontario Premier Doug Ford quipped "they're just a bunch of yahoos" and proceeded to lay out his clear and measured approach to handling the COVID-19 outbreak. Research by my firm for CTV News shows that Canada's "yahoo minority" is a mere 5 per cent of the population. When asked how much longer it should be before all businesses can be reopened, only one in 20 Canadians answered: immediately.

Political leaders should not feel any pressure to rush the reopening of the country, because data suggest Canadians believe more government intervention will still be required to stabilize things. Four in 10 Canadians are outright unsure when all businesses should be allowed to reopen, with the most popular response being one or two months from now.

What's clear is that the COVID-19 anxiety trend line, which has climbed like a rocket for much of the past two months, is now starting to flatten. In the weekly tracking of the top unprompted issue of concern, the novel coronavirus went from a response of zero per cent in January, to a high of 50 per cent of Canadians in mid-April, to 38 per cent by the beginning of May. The anxiety curve is flattening, but concern about jobs and the economy is on the rise.

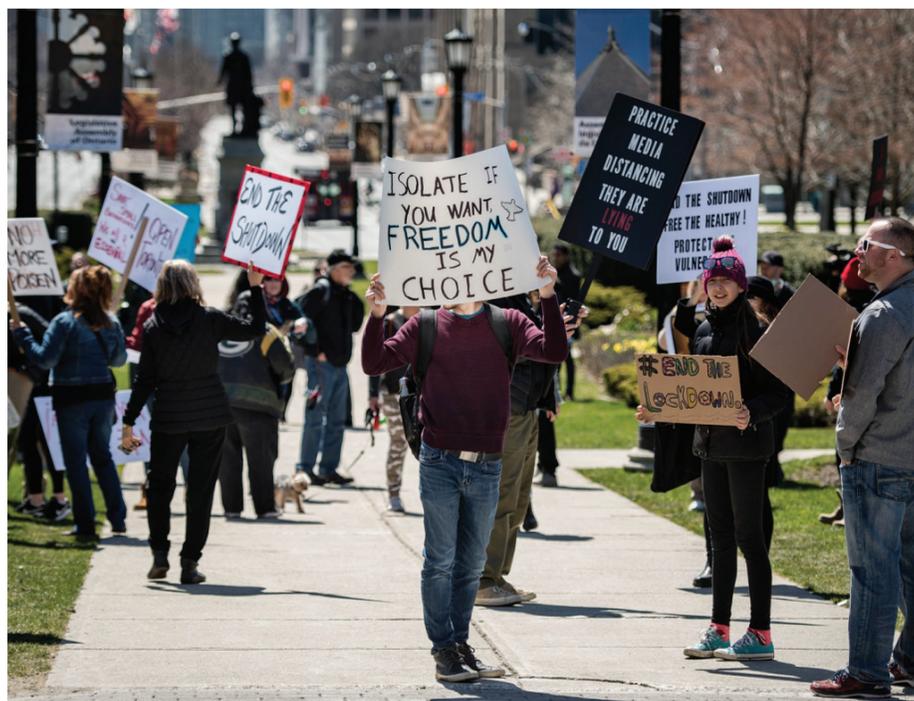
Even with the government providing billions of dollars to weather the COVID-19 storm, most Canadians believe that more aid for individuals and businesses will be needed. Survey data suggest that six in 10 Canadians believe that much more aid or somewhat more will have to be infused into the economy before things return to normal. One current estimate, according to the Parliamentary Budget Officer, is that the federal deficit alone will balloon to a whopping \$252-billion this year.

If experts are correct and we face another wave of the disease, what fiscal wiggle room will the government still have when it seems it's already thrown all it has - and more - at COVID-19? The cost to flatten the curve may be borne by a generation of Canadian taxpayers who now have been economically and socially scarred. This could very well be a watershed moment that remakes society, like the Great Depression.

Consumer sentiment research done by Nanos for Bloomberg News suggests that Canadians are six times more likely to say that they will spend less, rather than more, on non-essential items after stores and businesses reopen. Many Canadian retailers and businesses should be bracing themselves for economic hunger games.

The new normal may be one in which Canadians shift from being hyper-consumers, incurring debt to splurge on non-essential items, to frugal, measured and debt-averse customers. The days of "shop till you drop" may be replaced with the motto of the Great Depression: "Use it up, wear it out, make it do or do without." One casualty of the flattening of the COVID-19 curve may very well be supercharged consumerism.

Governments navigating the post-COVID-19 world may also find that their initial response to the pandemic was much easier than the transition to stability. Instructing Canadians to stay at home and remain physically distant from their neighbours are quick and easy directives. Federal and provincial political



Demonstrators in Toronto take part in a rally on April 25 to call for an end to shutdown measures put in place to limit the spread of COVID-19. TIJANA MARTIN/THE CANADIAN PRESS

leaders have generally been of one mind on the public-health front. Orchestrating a coherent strategy to move forward, from both a public-health and economic perspective, will be much more difficult to plan and manage.

Likewise, agreeing to pump money to stabilize the lives of Canadians and maintain the viability of businesses is easy. Managing the deficit and debt, and balancing the need for a diverse portfolio of government priorities, ranging from the environment through to reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, could very well rend asunder the current political consensus.

There is no consensus among Canadians about what to do with the deficits and debt incurred to get through the COVID-19 outbreak. About 28 per cent believe government programs and current tax levels should be maintained and the debt allowed to increase. Another 25 per cent believe there should be new taxes on businesses. Just 9 per cent say taxes on individuals should be increased.

Perhaps that is the only consensus on the path forward - that the tax burden on individuals should not be increased to pay for the fight to flatten the curve. Here, another casualty of the COVID-19 outbreak may be a breaking of the political orthodoxy of some politicians, mainly on the right side of the spectrum, that deficits are bad.

The casualties will not just be economic, but social. In a world where international travel is equated with health risks and where borders are strictly controlled, a new type of xenophobia may emerge where people normalize social behaviour with loved ones and friends, but remain socially distant to strangers because a stranger could represent an unknown health threat.

In a survey for The Globe and Mail, 63 per cent of respondents said they will be more cautious after the COVID-19 outbreak is over. Just 18 per cent said they will return to normal human contact such as handshakes when greeting people. It should be no surprise that one-half of Canadians are worried or somewhat worried about shopping in-person at the grocery store. A third casualty of flattening the COVID-19 curve will likely be a change in social norms.

One cannot dismiss the human casualties. Even though this pandemic is not as virulent or deadly as the Spanish flu of 1918, it will leave its psychological scar.

Many more Americans will be killed by COVID-19 than by the Vietnam War, which affected the American psyche for a generation. The COVID-19 death toll in London over the four weeks to April 17 rivalled the death toll of the Blitz in the Second World War during its worst four-week stretch, according to The Economist.

May marks the 75th anniversary of the end of the Battle of the Atlantic, a defining moment for Canada. Sadly, it is possible that Canada's COVID-19 casualties could reach or eventually surpass the more than 4,400 members of the Royal Canadian Navy, Royal Canadian Air Force and Canadian Merchant Navy who lost their lives when the war came to Canada's doorstep.

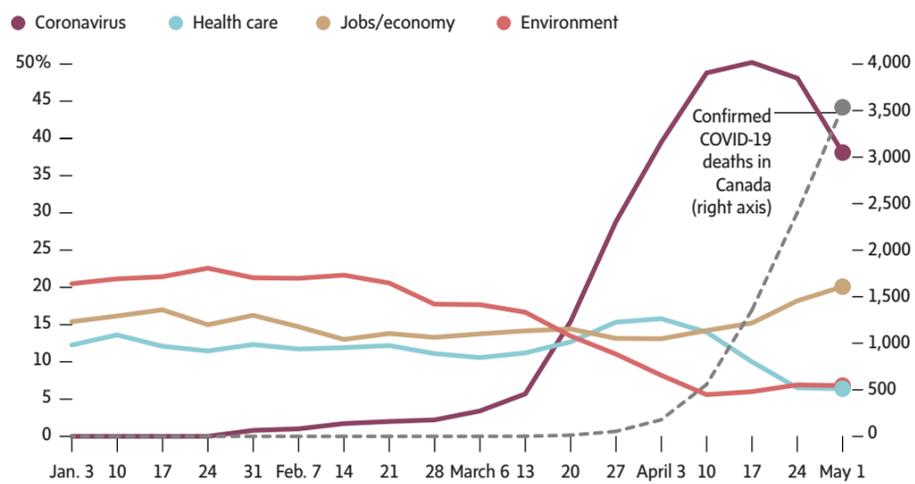
Fortunately for Canada, the "yahoos" are still firmly on the fringe. But the human, social and economic casualties incurred to flatten that curve are serious and will likely redefine a generation.

This column was based on multiple research studies completed by Nanos Research. They were all national random surveys of Canadians comprised of at least 1,000 individuals. Random studies of 1,000 are accurate within 3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. The reports with full methodologies and their technical notes are posted at nanos.co.

Canadians and COVID-19

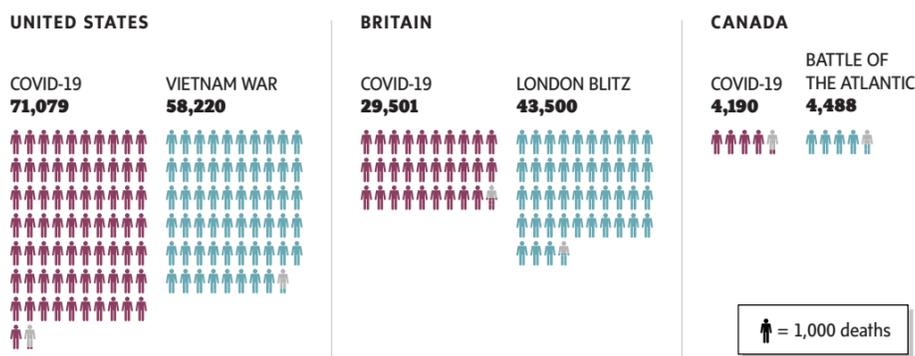
MOST IMPORTANT NATIONAL ISSUE, ACCORDING TO RESPONDENTS

Jan. 3 - May 1



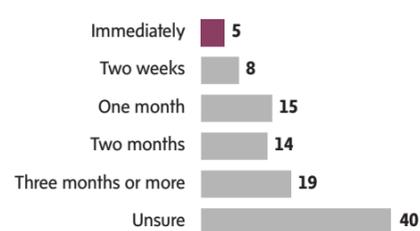
HUMAN CASUALTIES, COVID-19 vs. SELECT WARS

COVID-19 deaths as of May 6

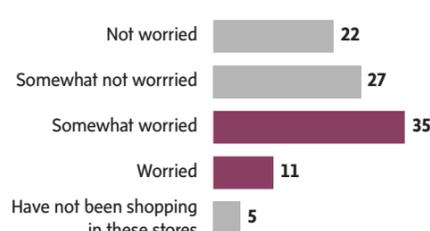


SURVEY RESULTS

How much longer should it be before all businesses in Canada should be allowed to reopen



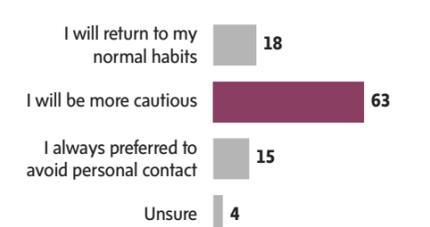
Level of worry about shopping in person at grocery stores



After stores and businesses reopen, I will spend...



Meeting people in public post-covid outbreak



Note: Numbers may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

MURAT YÜKSELIR / THE GLOBE AND MAIL, SOURCE: NANOS RESEARCH; JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY; VETERANS AFFAIRS CANADA; NATIONAL ARCHIVES; IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM