

Opioids in Canada: One-in-eight have family or close friends who faced addiction

Nearly 20 per cent of Canadians say they themselves have been prescribed opioids in the last five years

January 11, 2018 – The thousands of deaths across Canada as a result of opioid use and addiction has been a dominating public health, public safety, and public policy issue for more than two years.

Beyond the headlines and the grim statistics, a new public opinion poll from the Angus Reid Institute finds this nationwide epidemic striking close to home for a significant number of Canadians. One-in-eight (12%) – the equivalent of nearly 3.5 million Canadian adults – say they have close friends or family members who have become dependent on opioids in the last five years.

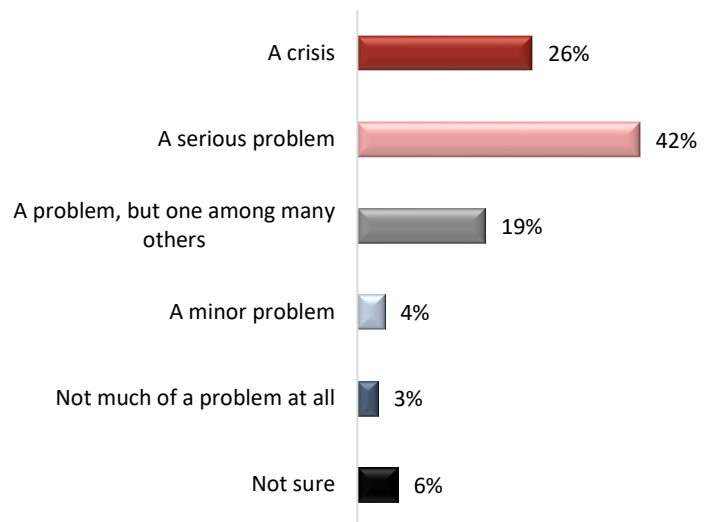
The issue opioid dependency rises to the level of a “crisis” in the eyes of more than one-in-four Canadians (26%), and a further four-in-ten (42%) say it is “a serious problem” for Canada today.

But while relatively few are of the opinion government is responding appropriately to the situation, most offer strong majority support for safe-consumption sites for drug users (67% support them) and mandatory treatment programs for those who overdose (85%).

More Key Findings:

- One-in-five Canadian adults (19%) say they have personally been prescribed opioids in the last five years, and fully three-in-ten (30%) say they are close with someone else who has

How serious a problem is this opioid issue for Canada today?



METHODOLOGY:

The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey from November 14 – 20, 2017, among a representative randomized sample of 1,510 Canadian adults who are members of the [Angus Reid Forum](#). For comparison purposes only, a probability sample of this size would carry a margin of error of +/- 2.5 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. Discrepancies in or between totals are due to rounding. The survey was self-commissioned and paid for by ARI. Detailed tables are found at the end of this release.

Additionally, ARI analyzed the results of an online survey conducted from December 7 – 14, 2017, among a representative, randomized sample of 5,413 Canadian adults who are members of the Angus Reid Forum. The data from this survey were donated by [MARU/Matchbox](#) and were used to provide city-level responses to the question about the seriousness of the opioid problem. City-level subsamples range from 102 – 533. Probability samples of these sizes would carry margins of error from +/- 9.7 percentage points to +/- 4.2 percentage points, respectively, 19 times out of 20.

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- Fewer than one-in-four (23%) say the federal government has “responded appropriately” to this issue, and nearly five times as many say it has put “too few” resources into its response (38%) as say it has allocated “too many” (8%)
- Provincial governments also receive a more negative than positive assessment for their responses to the epidemic
- More than three-quarters of Canadians (77%) agree with the statement, “The opioid problem is going to get a lot worse before it gets better,” and seven-in-ten (71%) say a public health issue of this magnitude would be receiving more attention if its victims weren’t primarily drug users
- Two-in-three Canadians (67%) say they are in favour of supervised-injection sites, and more than eight-in-ten (85%) support compulsory treatment programs for those who overdose
- Residents of British Columbia – the province that saw the largest number of opioid-related deaths in 2016 – are paying closer attention to this issue and more likely to see it as a crisis for all levels of government

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Introduction

The opioid epidemic in Canada – as in the United States and elsewhere – begins with the [proliferation of prescription opioids](#) such as oxycodone and hydromorphone, among others, in the 1990s and early 2000s. At that time, with notable [prodding from drug companies](#), doctors on both sides of the border started to embrace these drugs as a treatment for pain.

Increased opioid use led to increased opioid addiction, and when prescriptions ran out, black markets stepped in.

Today, despite concerns about physicians over-prescribing opioids, data from provincial health authorities [continues to show](#) the number of such prescriptions rising. And, at the same time, illicit drugs are increasingly being laced with synthetic opioids such as fentanyl, causing a surge in overdoses among street users as well.

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Opioid use is a massive and complex problem in Canada today, and while this survey sheds light on some of the most important elements of this problem, there are many other important areas of inquiry related to opioids in Canada that could be addressed in future research.

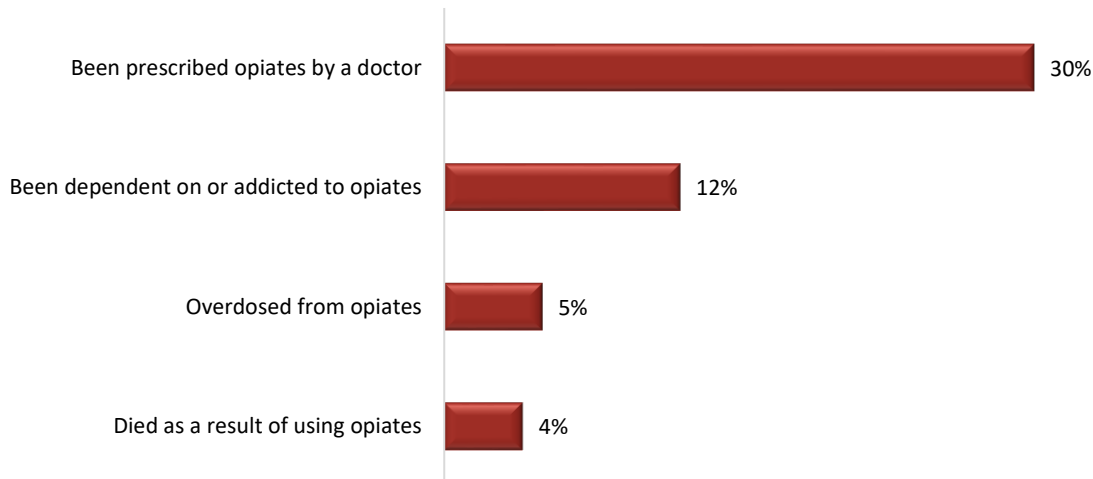
Part 1: Measuring the problem

Millions have a personal connection

Nearly one-in-five Canadians (19%) report having been prescribed opiates by a doctor in the last five years, and [recent research](#) from the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction suggests that roughly 2 per cent of Canadians who use opioid pain relievers do so for non-medical purposes.

The impact of the opioid crisis becomes even clearer when looking at the number of people who report a personal connection to someone who has been affected. Roughly one-in-eight Canadians (12% – the equivalent of more than 3 million people) say they have a close friend or family member who has been dependent on or addicted to opiates:

Thinking about the past five years, have any of your close friends or family members had any of the following experiences?

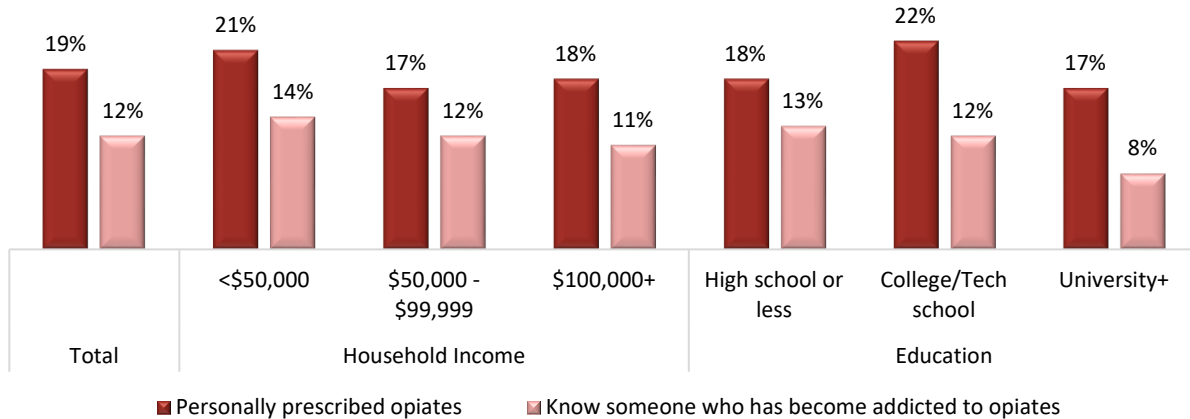


These personal connections to opioids and opioid addiction are not limited by age, gender, or social standing. Canadians of all income brackets and education levels are roughly equally like to have been prescribed these drugs, and to have a close friend or family member who has been addicted to them ([see comprehensive tables for greater detail](#)).

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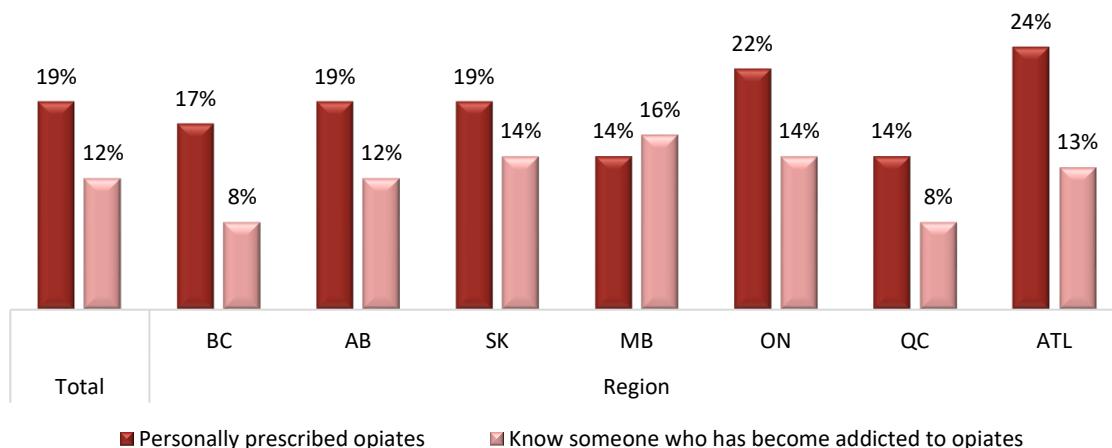
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Canadians' experiences with opioids in the last five years:



Notably, B.C. residents – despite the severity of the crisis in that province, which will be discussed later in this report – are no more likely than those who live in other regions to report having been prescribed opiates or become addicted to them, nor are they significantly more likely to say they know someone who has:

Canadians' experiences with opioids in the last five years:



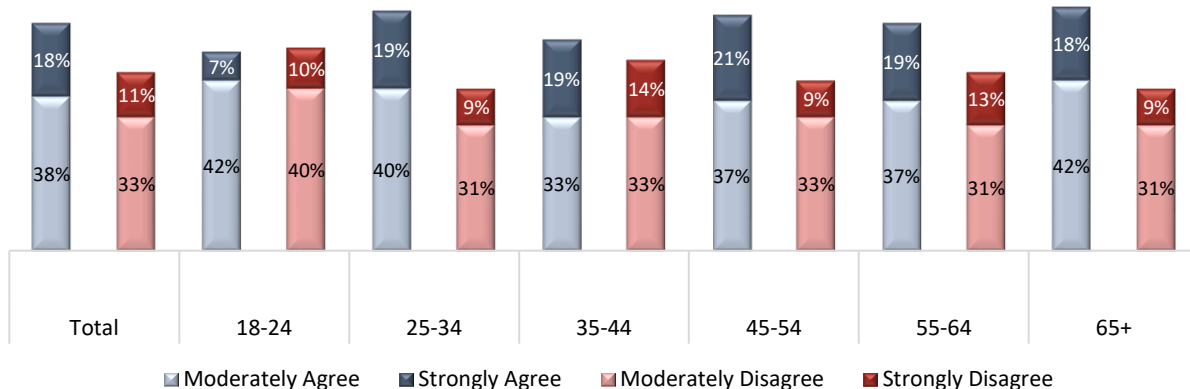
Though data suggests that the number of opiate prescriptions doctors are writing has not declined, a substantial number of Canadians seem to be worried about an over-correction.

Indeed, a small majority (56%) agrees with the statement “Because of this opioid problem, it’s now too hard for legitimate pain sufferers to get the drugs they need.” This view is fairly consistent across all age groups except those under age 25, who are divided almost evenly on the statement:

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"Because of this opioid problem, it's now too hard for legitimate pain sufferers to get the drugs they need"



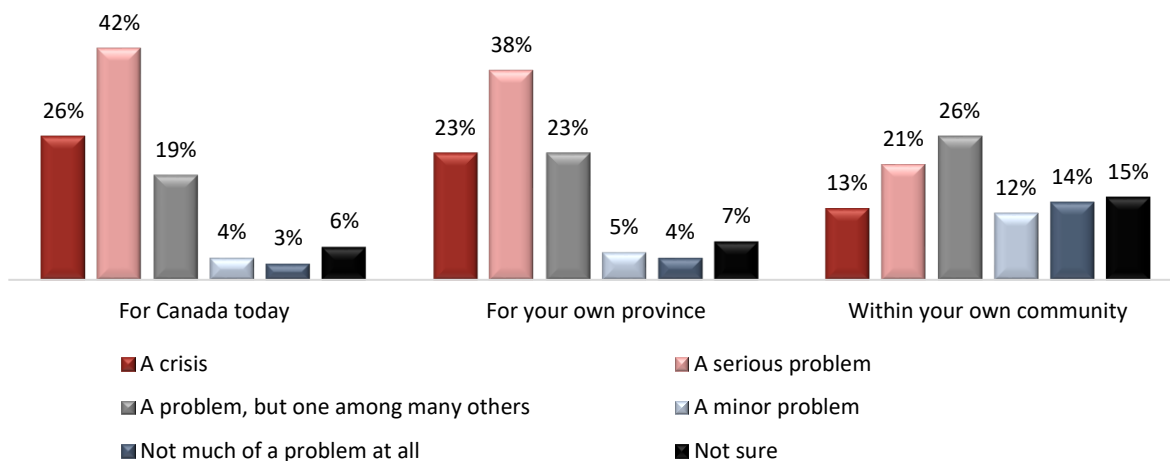
How serious is it in the eyes of Canadians?

Opioid-related deaths are occurring in every province and territory as a result of overdoses involving prescription painkillers and those involving illegal drugs laced with fentanyl.

"No area of Canada is necessarily safe from this crisis," said Dr. Theresa Tam, Canada's chief public health officer when announcing the 2016 statistics. "Everybody needs to be prepared."

Canadians may or may not feel prepared to deal with opioids in their communities, but this poll finds most recognizing the problem as a serious one – at least at the national and provincial level, although less so in their own communities:

How serious a problem is this opioid issue ...



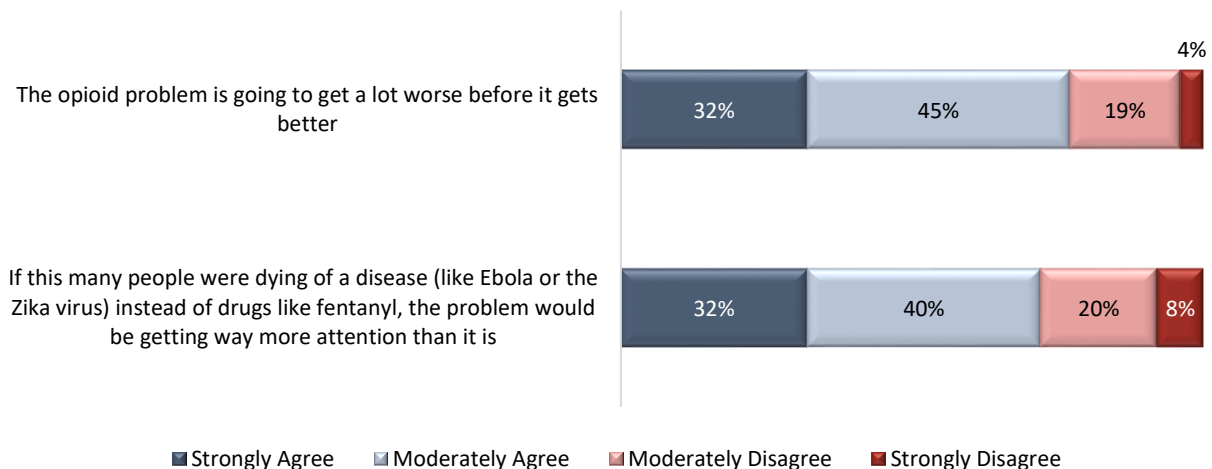
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The high number of Canadians who regard this situation as either a crisis or a serious problem is at least partially a product of their high degree of awareness of the issue. Fully seven-in-ten Canadians (71%) say they have been seeing either “some” (38%) or “a lot” (33%) of media coverage of the opioid epidemic – a total rate of awareness that ranks among the highest the Angus Reid Institute has recorded for a non-election topic.

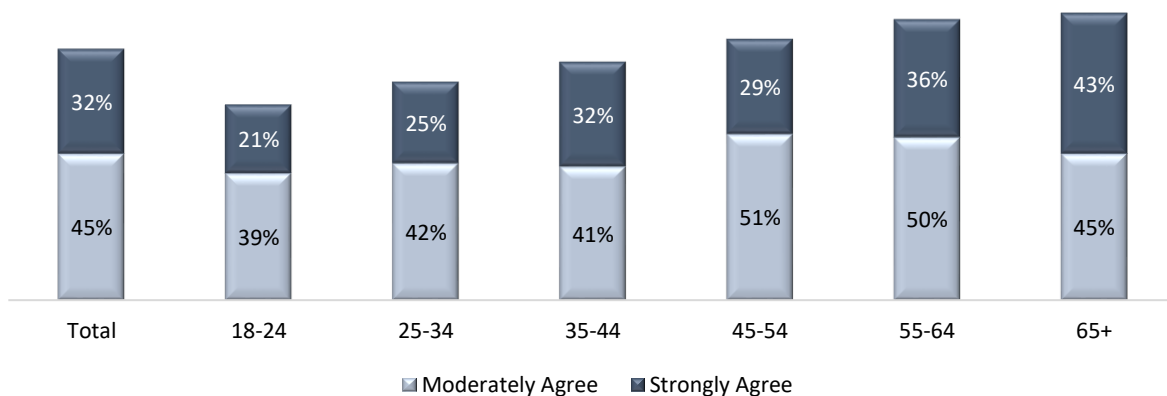
This pervading awareness of the opioid problem and belief in its severity is reflected in Canadians' responses to a pair of statements about the issue: First, that the issue “is going to get worse before it gets better” (77% agree with this statement), and second that it would be receiving even more attention if it were a more traditional public health crisis (71%).

Do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?



Views on the “more attention” statement are fairly consistent across demographics ([see comprehensive tables](#)). The other statement elicits a more varied response:

"The opioid problem is going to get a lot worse before it gets better"

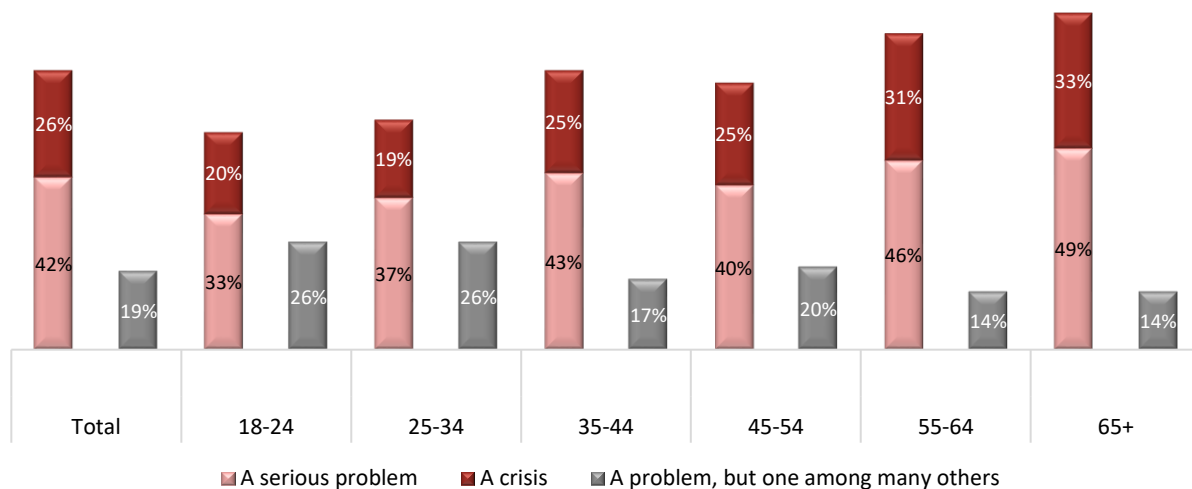


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The fact that younger Canadians seem to be less concerned that the opioid epidemic will worsen mirrors a lower degree of concern they express about the severity of the epidemic in the first place. Canadians under age 35 are more likely than those in older age groups to see opioid use as one problem among many, and less likely to see it as a serious problem or a crisis, as seen in the following graph:

How serious a problem is this opioid issue for Canada today?



The regional picture: Concerns highest in British Columbia

Canada's opioid epidemic has been most acute in its westernmost province. British Columbia became the first province in Canada to declare [a public health emergency](#) after a surge in overdoses – many related to the synthetic opioid fentanyl – between 2013 and early 2016.

Since the declaration in April 2016, the number of overdoses in B.C. has continued to rise. A total of 982 people [died of overdoses](#) in the province in 2016, and the 2017 total [topped 1,000](#) in just the first eight months of the year.

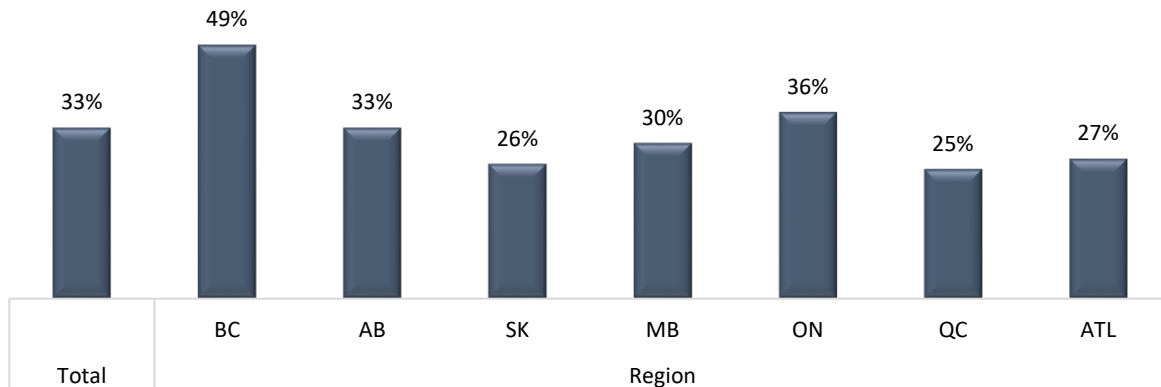
Opioids have become a problem in every province in recent years, but British Columbia remains the region with the [highest rates](#) of opioid-related deaths and hospitalizations per 100,000 people.

Perhaps as a result of their province's central role in the national discussion on opioids, British Columbians are more likely than residents of other regions to report paying close attention to this issue in the news and discussing it with friends and family. Nearly half (49%) say they have followed the story this closely, compared to 36 per cent or fewer everywhere else:

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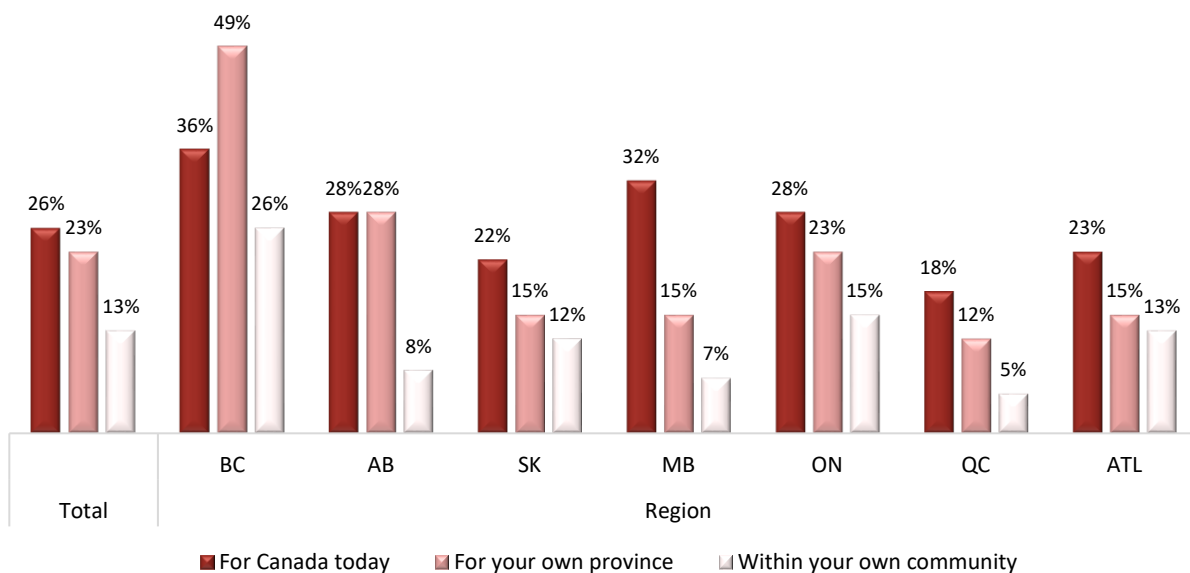
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Percentage who say they are "Seeing a lot of coverage" of the opioid issue and having discussions about it with family and friends



Relatedly, B.C. residents are more likely to describe opioid use as a "crisis" than those living anywhere else.

Percentage saying the opioid issue is "a crisis" for each, by region:



To further excavate regional differences in views on this issue, the Angus Reid Institute asked these same three questions of a larger national sample – one that allows for comparisons between specific metro regions.

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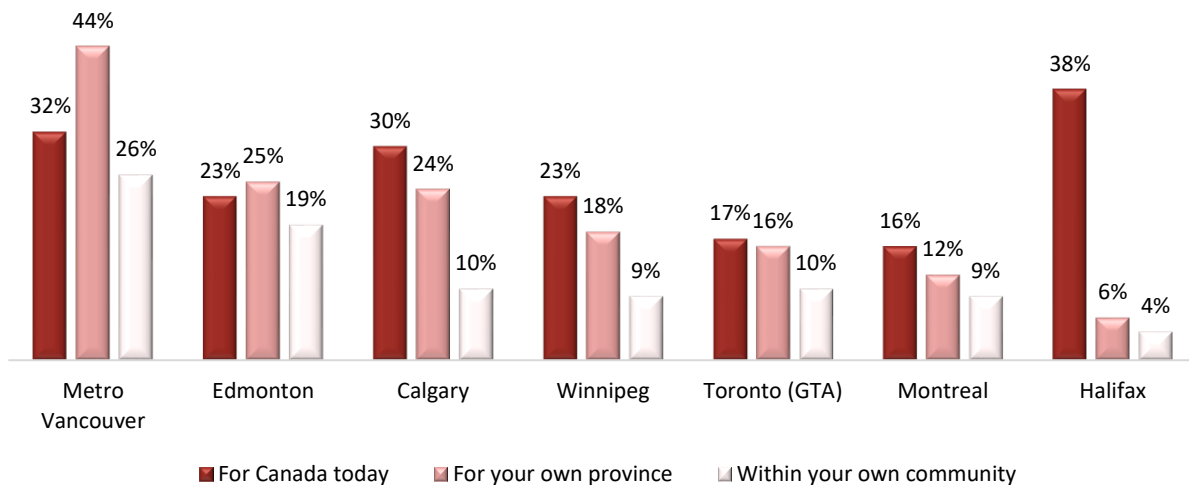
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The urban story closely mirrors the provincial one: Residents of Metro Vancouver tend to be more likely than residents of other large metro areas to see a crisis nationally, provincially, and locally, and residents of Alberta's two big cities are next-most-concerned about the issue in their province.

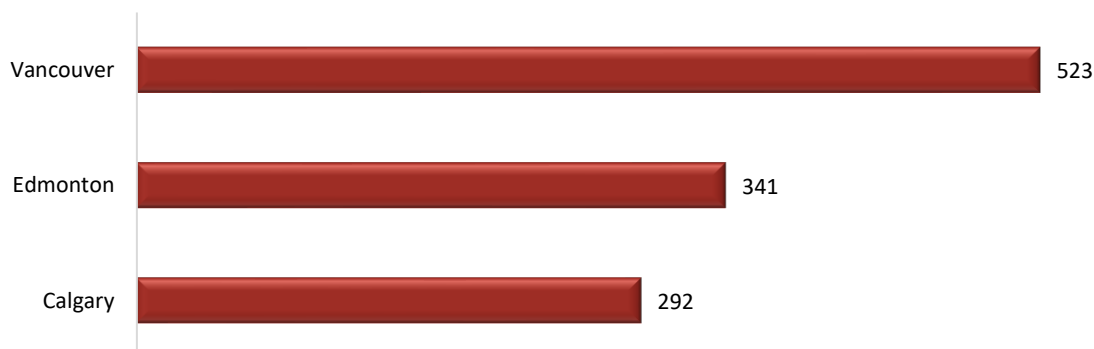
Residents of Halifax are notable outliers on the seriousness of opioid use in Canada today. Nearly four-in-ten there see the opioid issue as a national crisis, but only one-in-20 would describe it as a crisis for Nova Scotia or their local municipality:

Percentage saying the opioid issue is "a crisis" for each, by urban area:



Perhaps unsurprisingly, concern at the local and provincial level is highest in the metro areas that have the highest rates of hospitalization for opioid poisoning: Vancouver, Edmonton, and Calgary [topped the list](#) in terms of the raw number of such hospitalizations between March 2016 and March 2017:

Metropolitan areas with the highest number of opioid poisoning hospitalizations in 2016-17 (Sources: Canadian Institute for Health Information, the Globe and Mail)



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Part 2: Addressing the problem

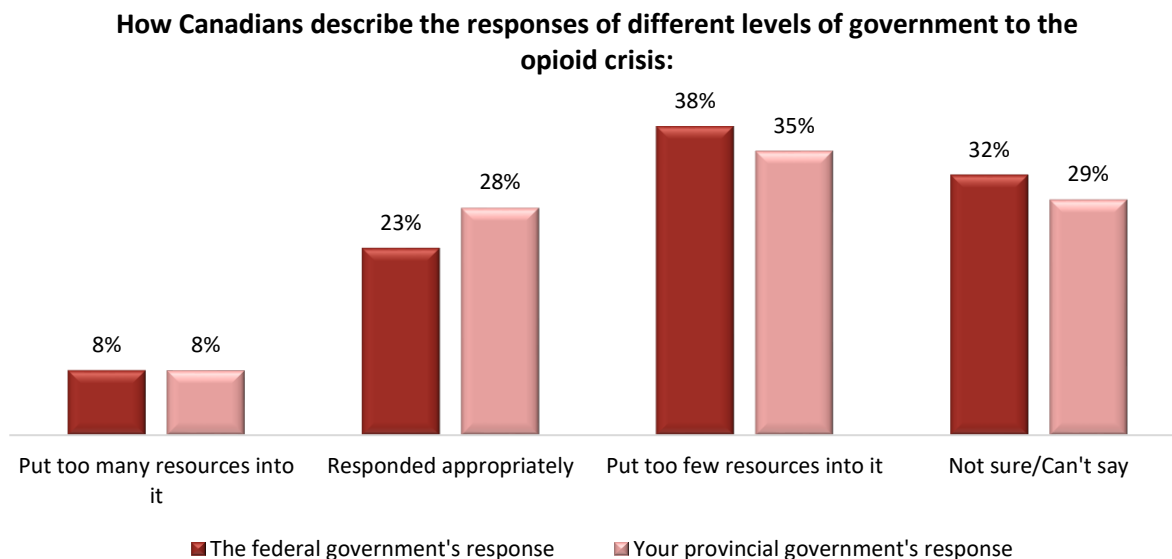
Are governments doing enough?

Both Canada's federal and provincial governments have developed strategies for responding to the opioid epidemic. At the federal level, one of the most notable changes has been [a loosening of restrictions](#) on supervised consumption sites – facilities in which drug users can consume opiates and other substances with staff on site to monitor for and respond to overdoses.

In addition to this and other changes aimed at reducing the harm that comes from opioid use, the federal government's strategy has included efforts to improve addiction prevention and treatment, as well as improve enforcement of opioid-related laws. The progress of all of these efforts is detailed on the government's [opioid crisis response website](#).

That said, [critics have described](#) the federal response so far as insufficient, and relatively few Canadians see the federal government responding "appropriately" to the issue. Fewer than one-in-four (23%) say this, while nearly four-in-ten (38%) say "too few" federal resources have been allocated to the epidemic. Almost one-in-three (32%) are unsure how to characterize the federal response.

Provincial governments' responses to this issue have been varied, but Canadians views of them are – in aggregate – similar to their views of federal efforts:

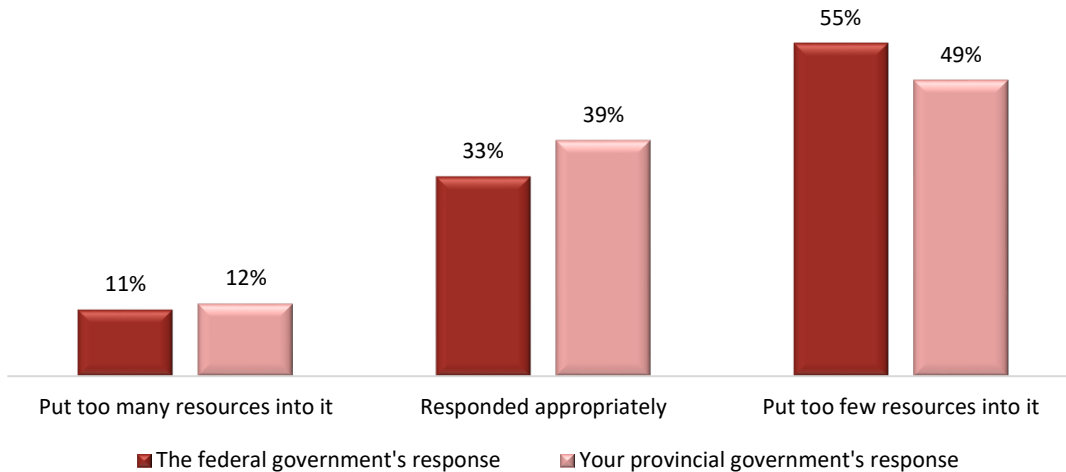


Removing those who are unsure and looking only at responses from those who offer an opinion paints a clearer picture of the decided opinion on this question. Nearly half (49%) of those with an opinion see their province's efforts coming up short, and a small majority (55%) feel the same way about the federal government's response, as seen in the following graph:

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How Canadians describe the responses of different levels of government to the opioid crisis: (Excluding those who say "not sure/can't say")
(N=1029 for federal government response;
N=1068 for provincial government response)



As might be expected, assessments of provincial government responses vary depending on the province in question. Manitoba is the region most inclined to say its government has put “too few resources” toward the problem (45% do), but the percentage saying “too few resources” outnumbers the percentage saying “too many” across all regions.

It should also be noted that a significant number of respondents in each region are unsure how they would assess their provincial government’s response, as seen in the table that follows.

And based on whatever you've seen or heard about this and your own impressions, how would you describe your own provincial government's response to the opioid issue in this country?								
(unweighted sample sizes)	Total (1510)	Region						
		BC (197)	AB (153)	SK (102)	MB (101)	ON (509)	QC (355)	ATL (93*)
Put too many resources into it	8%	15%	10%	2%	3%	8%	7%	5%
Responded appropriately	28%	29%	33%	33%	20%	22%	35%	28%
Put too few resources into it	35%	35%	26%	37%	45%	38%	31%	39%
Not sure/Can't say	29%	21%	31%	28%	31%	33%	28%	28%

*small sample size

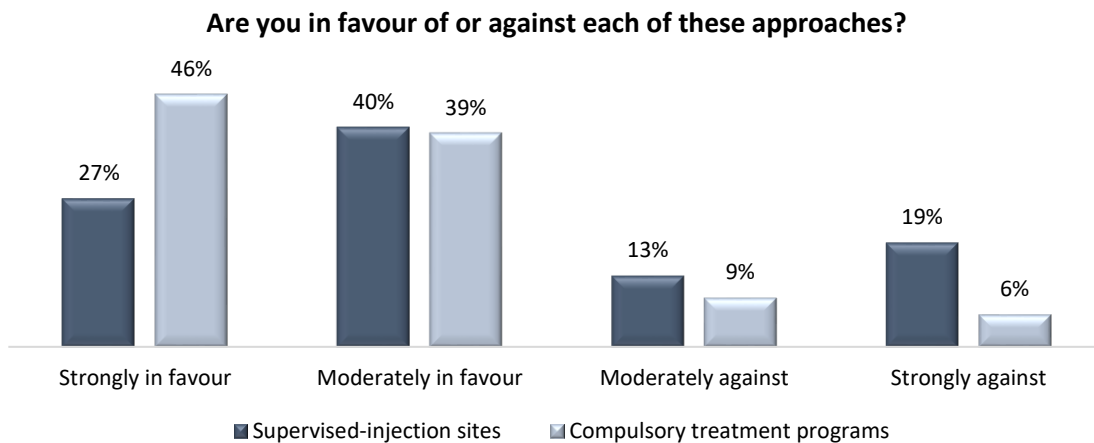
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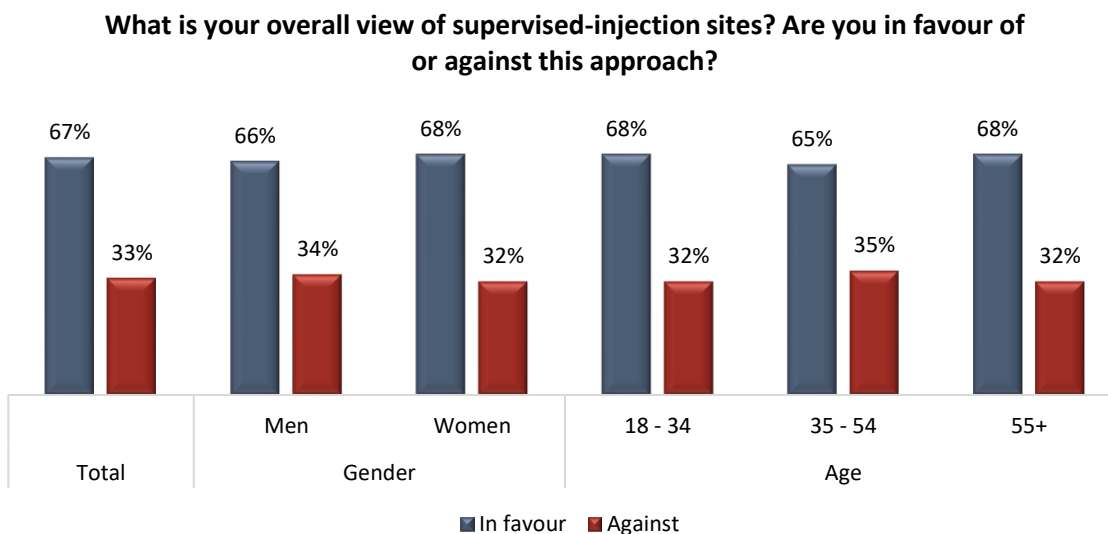
Strong support for safe-injection sites, mandatory treatment

This survey also asked Canadians to weigh in on a pair of responses governments have proposed to the opioid epidemic. Two-thirds (67%) say they are in favour of supervised-injection sites, and an even larger majority (85%) support compulsory treatment programs for people who overdose or are otherwise found to be abusing opioids.

Notably, compulsory treatment programs – which [are being considered](#) in several U.S. states – are much more likely than supervised-injection sites to elicit strong support from the Canadian public:



The percentage supporting supervised-injection sites is consistent across age and gender groups, as seen in the graph that follows.



The biggest differences on this question are political: Those who cast ballots in 2015 for the Conservative Party – which imposed [significant limitations](#) on the opening of new supervised-injection sites while in

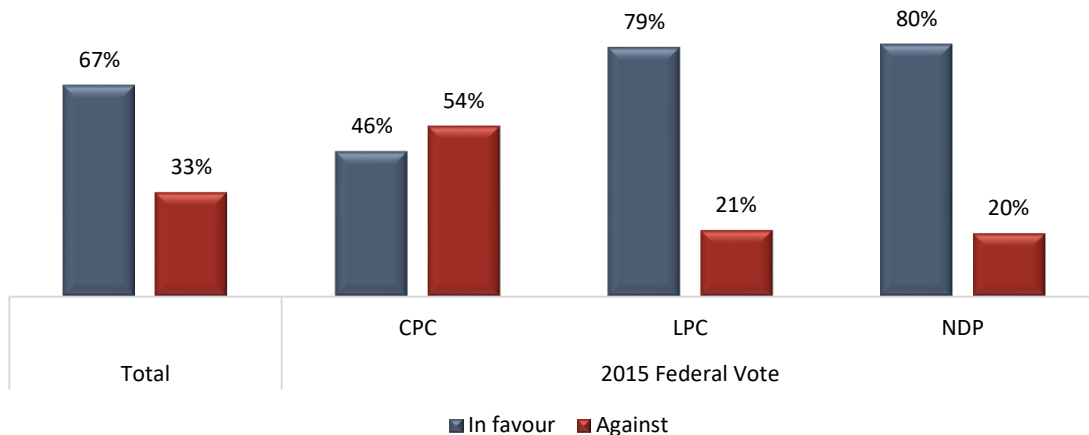
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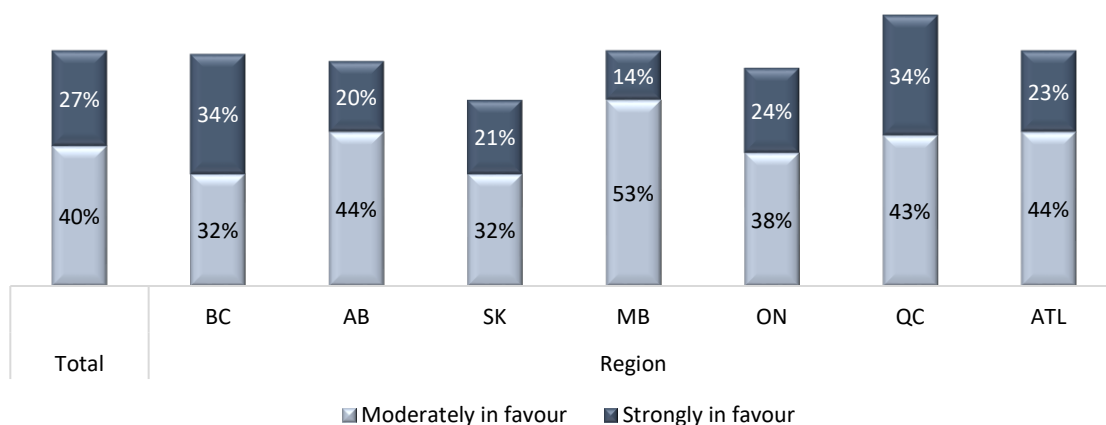
government – are divided on the issue, while past supporters of the federal Liberal and New Democratic parties are each in favour of safe-injection sites by a roughly four-to-one margin:

What is your overall view of supervised-injection sites? Are you in favour of or against this approach?



Regionally, B.C. and Quebec have the highest percentage respondents who say they are “strongly in favour” of such measures (34%). That said, overall support is identical to the national average in B.C. (67%), while Quebec is an outlier with nearly eight-in-ten (78%) supporting safe-consumption sites:

What is your overall view of supervised-injection sites? Are you in favour of or against this approach?

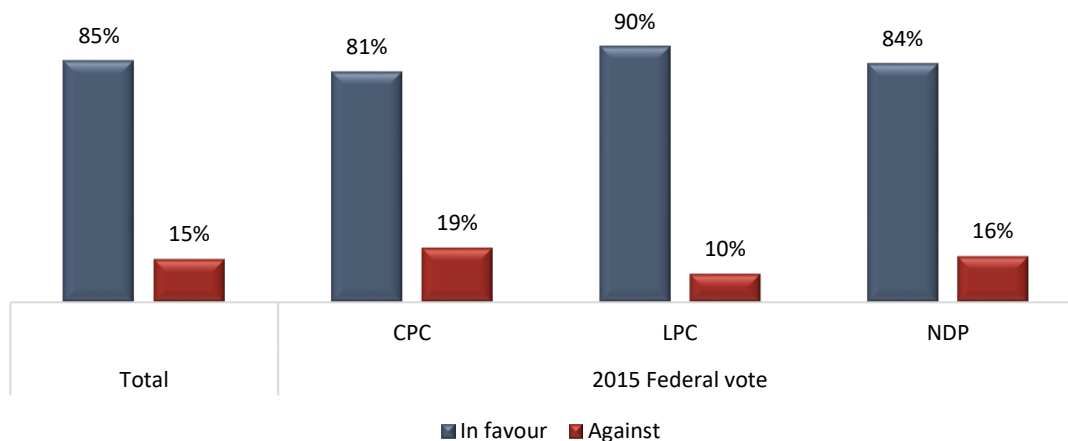


For their part, mandatory treatment programs for those who overdose are less controversial with the Canadian public. At least 80 per cent are in favour of this approach across all major demographic groups, with support topping 90 per cent among residents of Saskatchewan and Manitoba and among those who voted for the Liberal party in the 2015 federal election ([see comprehensive tables](#)).

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What is your overall view of compulsory treatment programs? Are you in favour of or against this approach?



Compulsory treatment is already on the books in most provinces for people with mental health issues, but such programs have faced criticism for overuse, and for infringing on patients' civil liberties.

*The **Angus Reid Institute (ARI)** was founded in October 2014 by pollster and sociologist, Dr. Angus Reid. ARI is a national, not-for-profit, non-partisan public opinion research foundation established to advance education by commissioning, conducting and disseminating to the public accessible and impartial statistical data, research and policy analysis on economics, political science, philanthropy, public administration, domestic and international affairs and other socio-economic issues of importance to Canada and its world.*

Summary tables follow. For detailed results by age, gender, region, education, and other demographics, [click here](#).

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Based on whatever you've seen or heard about the issue, how serious a problem would you say this is ... [For Canada today]							
(unweighted sample sizes)	Metro area						
	Metro Vancouver (315)	Edmonton (193)	Calgary (177)	Winnipeg (533)	Toronto (GTA) (288)	Montreal (304)	Halifax (102)
A crisis	32%	23%	30%	23%	17%	16%	38%
A serious problem	32%	36%	25%	40%	34%	36%	17%
A problem, but one among many others	22%	26%	29%	26%	25%	19%	28%
A minor problem	3%	3%	5%	4%	6%	9%	9%
Not much of a problem at all	4%	2%	3%	1%	5%	4%	1%
Not sure	7%	10%	8%	6%	13%	15%	8%

Based on whatever you've seen or heard about the issue, how serious a problem would you say this is ... [For your own province]							
(unweighted sample sizes)	Metro area						
	Metro Vancouver (315)	Edmonton (193)	Calgary (177)	Winnipeg (533)	Toronto (GTA) (288)	Montreal (304)	Halifax (102)
A crisis	44%	25%	24%	18%	16%	12%	6%
A serious problem	29%	33%	28%	36%	33%	34%	41%
A problem, but one among many others	15%	26%	19%	33%	25%	21%	33%
A minor problem	3%	4%	9%	4%	6%	12%	10%
Not much of a problem at all	4%	2%	3%	2%	5%	6%	2%
Not sure	6%	10%	17%	6%	15%	16%	9%

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Based on whatever you've seen or heard about the issue, how serious a problem would you say this is ... [Within your own community]							
(unweighted sample sizes)	Metro area						
	Metro Vancouver (315)	Edmonton (193)	Calgary (177)	Winnipeg (533)	Toronto (GTA) (288)	Montreal (304)	Halifax (102)
A crisis	26%	19%	10%	9%	10%	9%	4%
A serious problem	30%	24%	27%	23%	15%	23%	19%
A problem, but one among many others	22%	26%	21%	33%	23%	23%	42%
A minor problem	10%	11%	14%	11%	12%	11%	15%
Not much of a problem at all	6%	6%	15%	12%	14%	16%	10%
Not sure	7%	14%	13%	11%	26%	18%	11%

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