



# COVID-19 & CANADIAN YOUTH IMPACTS, PERSPECTIVES & THE RECOVERY

A REPORT BASED ON A NATIONAL SURVEY OF 1,000  
CANADIANS AGED 15 TO 30.

GOOD DECISIONS  
REQUIRE GOOD DATA.

**ABACUS DATA**

CONDUCTED FOR A COALITION OF NATIONAL  
YOUTH SERVING AGENCIES

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OCTOBER 2020

In September 2020, Abacus Data completed a nationally representative survey with 1,000 Canadian youth aged 15 to 30.

The purpose of this research was two-fold:

1. To understand the impacts and perspectives of the pandemic thus far for Canadian youth.
2. To explore their ideas for recovery from the pandemic.

Youth were asked questions about how they feel about their lives right now, their perspectives on the long-term and short-term impacts on their lives, and what they want to see in a recovery plan.

In short, we wanted to better understand the experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic thus far, as told by Canadian youth.

This study was made possible thanks to the inspiration, commitment, support and financial contribution of the following organizations:



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## KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

1. *Compared with 2019, Canadian youth are still likely to say their lives are at least ok but fewer describe their lives as good, especially those who are younger. They have been managing to weather the storm, but it won't be without consequences.*
2. *The pandemic has caused fundamental shifts to education, employment, and financial situations of Canadian youth, but above all else it has fundamentally altered the structure of their lives and the supports they can access. The COVID-19 pandemic has shifted the very framework of young Canadian's lives.*
3. *Looking long-term, youth are facing worry and uncertainty about their futures, but are keenly aware that there are others who may be facing greater challenges. Like most predictions about the general population, the impacts of the pandemic on youth are likely going to be long-lasting.*
4. *Aside from a global pandemic there have been growing concerns about other issues in our society, and Canadian youth are paying attention to these too. These have added compounding stresses to the lives of youth. Overall, there is awareness and concern about the growing number of social issues beyond the pandemic.*
5. *Youth want a comprehensive recovery policy that focuses on those most in need, providing long-term solutions that not only address the consequences of the pandemic, but the pre-existing inequalities as well. Youth want a plan that deals with the issues faced by their peers but one that doesn't leave anyone out, particularly those in marginalized communities and those who were facing challenges even before the pandemic began.*

## INTRODUCTION

Seven months ago, the COVID-19 pandemic began to change everything from our connections to loved ones, financial situations, to access to supports and outlook on our futures. The impacts felt by Canadian youth are no different - many report experiencing impacts to their mental health, education, employment opportunities, and support networks.

The organizations that supported this project are there for youth as they continue to deal with these impacts now, and into the future.

In this report, we share where youth believe they are at today, their evaluation of the pandemic so far, and what they see for the future.

Aside from impacts on specific aspects of their lives, the pandemic has also changed the reference point for how youth evaluate their lives overall. Like Canadians in general, the pandemic has created a 'new normal' and new reference points for what is good or not, new anchors to assess their lives and their relative position vis-à-vis others.

Despite all of the disruptions to their lives, youth are no more likely to report feeling worried or angry as they were last summer. And a majority continue to believe their country is headed in the right direction. This isn't to say the COVID-19 pandemic has been without consequences but rather it has added to pre-existing concerns about what the future holds for them.

Canadian youth are perceptive, and understand the negative impacts of the pandemic on themselves and those around them, but they also have desires and hope for how to rebuild a better for themselves and all Canadians.

*We acknowledge that not all youth will have the same experiences in part due to their socio-economic status, gender, sexual identity, and ethnicity. In each section of the report, we have noted how experiences and perceptions may be impacted by some of these differences.*

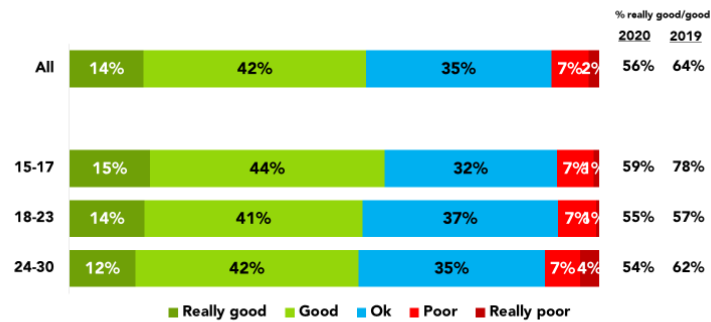
## HOW ARE YOUTH DOING RIGHT NOW?

*Canadian youth are still likely to say their lives are at least ok but fewer describe their lives as good, especially those who are younger.*

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, Canadian youth think less positively about their lives overall. Right now, just over half of youth say their lives are good, a decline from last year. Those aged 15 to 17 have seen the greatest shift in perceptions with a 20-percentage point drop in positive evaluations since last summer. Now, their perceptions are much more aligned with those of older Canadian youth.

There has been a small increase in those describing their lives as poor—among those aged 15 to 17, but these youth are still in the minority. These perceptions change from situation to situation. Those who identify as a member of a racialized community and those from lower income households are twice as likely to describe their life as poor than those not from those groups.

### HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR LIFE?

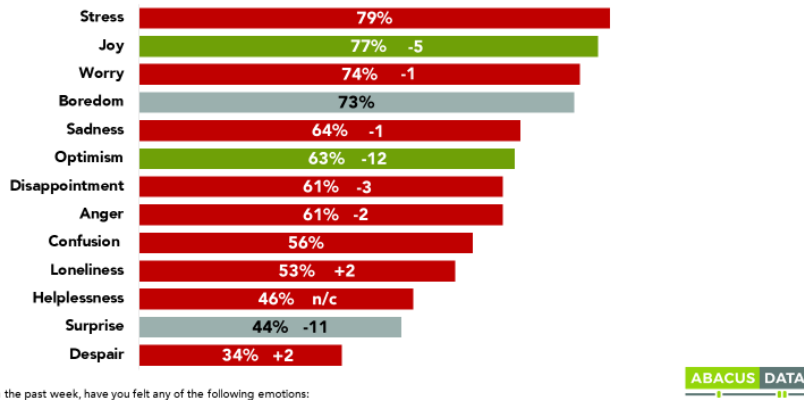


Overall, how would you describe your life at the moment?

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While Canadian youth may be feeling a little less optimistic about their lives overall, little has changed in way of their emotions, especially negative emotions.

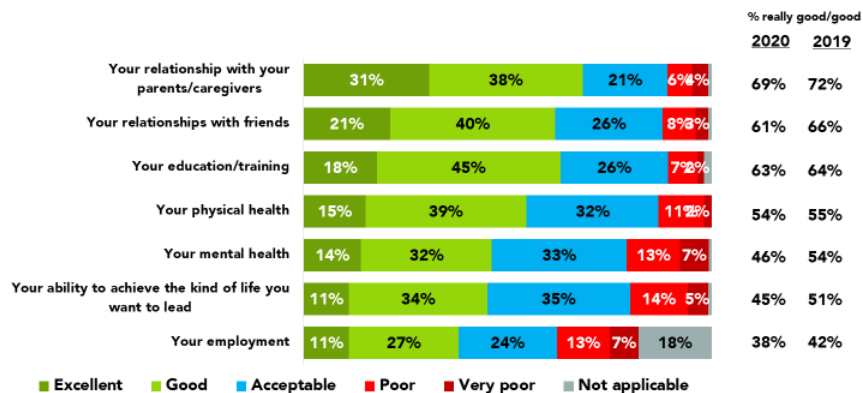
## IN THE PAST WEEK HAVE YOU FELT...



Canadian youth are less likely to experience feelings of joy and optimism than they were last year, but overall, there are no notable changes to negative emotions like anger, disappointment, worry, loneliness, and despair. Instead, there are greater differences between ages. Age and life stage have a great impact on the emotions felt from the pandemic. Those who are younger are left feeling angry and disappointed, while those who are older are more likely to be feeling helpless and despaired. These feelings are even stronger for younger youth who live in lower income households.

As with emotions, on the whole youth evaluate their lives remarkably similar from last summer. Evaluations of relationships, education, physical health, and opportunities shifted 6-percentage points or less. The only notable shift overall is mental health; 46% of Canadian youth say it is excellent/good, compared to 54% last year, an 8-percentage point decline.

## HOW WOULD YOU RATE YOUR SATISFACTION WITH...



How would you rate your satisfaction with the following aspects of your life?

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## UPSHOT

Canadian youth have been managing to weather the storm created by the COVID-19 pandemic. But the pandemic has not occurred without consequences. Assessments of their own lives and emotions are more stable than we had anticipated, but the point of reference has changed.

Take the example of employment. Youth are just as satisfied with their employment now as they were last summer. But they have been experiencing record unemployment rates as a result of the pandemic. Evaluations now come with the caveat, ‘...given the circumstances’.

Rather than outright cause for alarm, the changing circumstances signal troubling times ahead. For example, there has been a sharp decline in the general outlook of the youngest cohort in the study group. The majority are alright, but there are growing feelings of resentment towards their situation- they feel angry, sad and disappointed about what is going on around them. Most older youth say the country is going in the right direction, but there is less certainty about the way our economy works, and the political system. Youth are paying attention to how our leaders are managing the situation and will continue to watch and see what they do next.

Second, there is evidence of growing concern about the mental health of young Canadians. Fewer youth are experiencing feelings of joy and optimism, and more give more negative self-assessments of their mental



health than did last year. And a third say the shift to digital during this time has made it more difficult for them to access supports for their mental health. As youth continue to navigate through the pandemic and beyond, they will need more supports/access to opportunities to improve their mental health.

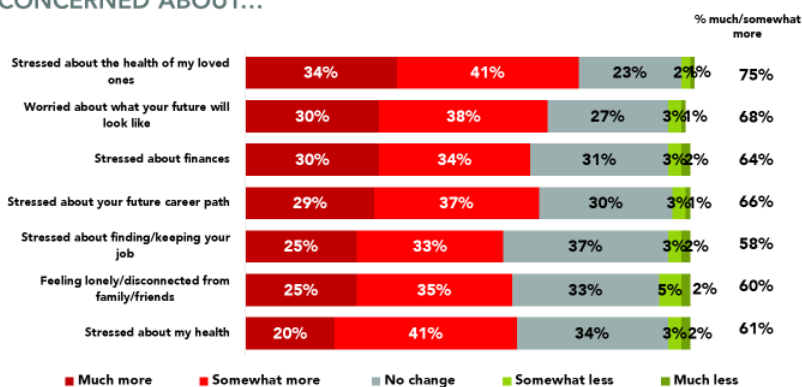
## HOW HAS THE PANDEMIC IMPACTED THEIR LIVES SO FAR?

*The pandemic has caused fundamental shifts to education, employment, and financial situations of Canadian youth, but above all else it has fundamentally altered the structure of their lives and the supports they can access.*

Two-thirds (67%) of Canadian youth are at least somewhat worried about the coronavirus pandemic situation. This worry is stronger among those who are younger.

The pandemic has added additional stresses to everything from finances, to health, to their education, to job and career prospects. Above all else, youth are concerned about their loved ones--75% say this has been an added stress because of the pandemic. Fully, 30% are experiencing greater levels of stress on every single aspect discussed in the survey.

### WOULD YOU SAY THE PANDEMIC HAS MADE YOU MORE OR LESS CONCERNED ABOUT...



Compared to usual, would you say the COVID-19 pandemic has made you more or less

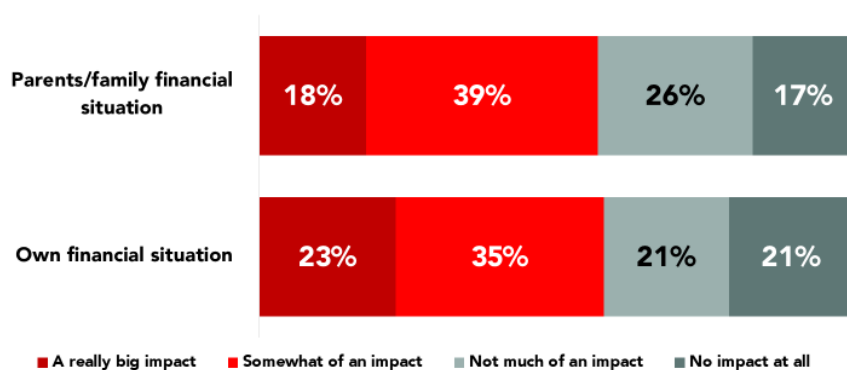
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The pandemic has also placed greater pressure and stresses on education. With the added distraction of a pandemic, many are finding it difficult to learn and are worried about the impact this will have on their grades. New learning formats mean greater difficulty in accessing the supports. Those living in lower income households and those who identify as a member of a racialized community are the most concerned about falling behind. 63% of students say the pandemic has made it more difficult for them to access their education. This is felt most strongly by those who identify as a member of a racialized community (29% say it really describes them, compared to just 23% of those who don't identify as a member of a racialized community) and those who live in rural areas (35%, compared to 23% of those living in urban and suburban areas).

Concerns about their safety are also elevated. 62% are worried about contracting COVID-19 when and if they return to in-person classes.

Financial stresses are also cause for concern. Fully, 58% have felt impacts to their own financial situations, and 57% say their families have experienced their own financial setbacks. What is most concerning is the disproportionate impacts on those in lower income households. For those under 18 in low-income households, 54% say the pandemic has had a really big impact on their family's financial situation, 46-percentage points higher than everyone else.

### IMPACTS ON FINANCIAL SITUATION



To what extent, if any, has COVID-19 had a negative impact on any of the following

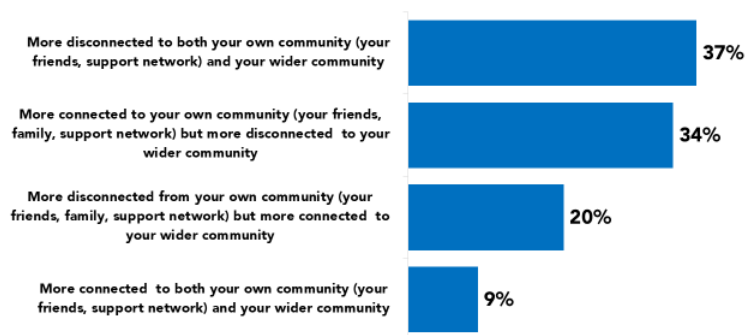


The pandemic has also had impacts on current and future career opportunities for young Canadians. 61% of youth have already faced

challenges with employment- either less hours, the loss of a job, or the absence of seasonal work they would have taken on. And two thirds have already proactively made changes to future education plans, careers or both. Younger youth from lower income households feel the greatest pressure to change course and reevaluate their plans.

The most widespread disruption to the lives of Canadian youth overall, are the disruptions to social networks. Since the onset of the pandemic, 91% say they've felt more disconnected from their own community, their wider community, or both.

## IMPACTS ON CONNECTIONS



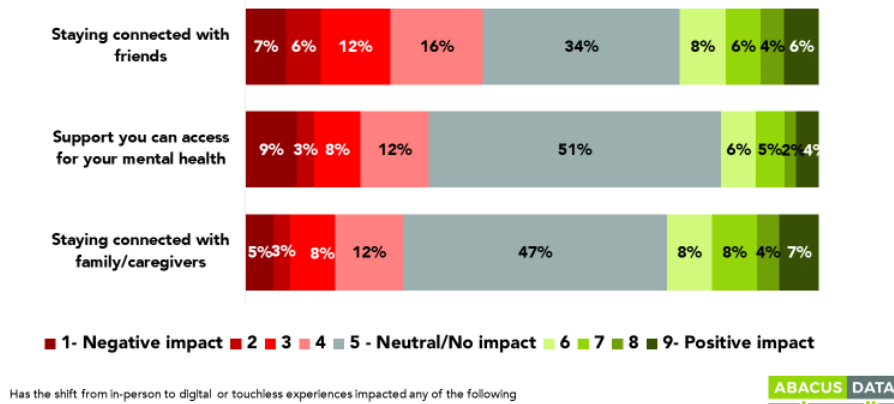
\*And since the pandemic began would you say you have felt...

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The pandemic has made it hard for youth to connect with their social networks. Three in four say their ability to participate in extracurricular activities has been impacted while 80% say the same about opportunities for social connections overall.

Despite being digital natives, 2 in 5 say the shift to digital interactions has made it more difficult to connect with friends while 1 in 4 report it being more challenging to connect with family or caregivers.

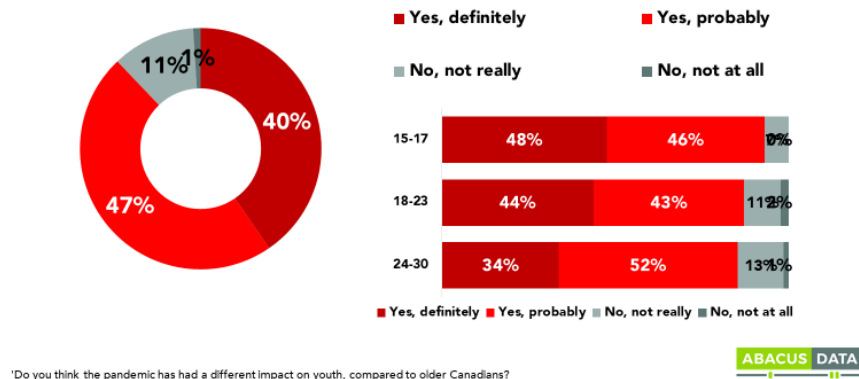
## IMPACTS OF DIGITAL ON SUPPORT NETWORK



These challenges are greater for those who live in lower income households. They are twice as likely to feel lonely and disconnected from family and friends, and twice as likely to say the shift to digital has contributed to challenges connecting family, friends, and supports.

And while young Canadians understand that the pandemic has impacted everyone, nearly all say the pandemic has impacted youth differently, compared to older Canadians, especially those who are younger.

## THE PANDEMIC HAS HAD A DIFFERENT IMPACT ON YOUTH.....



In particular, there are broad and deep concerns about the disproportionate impacts to youth:

- Being at a higher risk of poor mental health (81% very/somewhat concerned)

- Feeling greater financial impacts (80% very/somewhat concerned)
- At a higher risk of experiencing violence (71% very/somewhat concerned)
- Having a more difficult time connecting to family and supports (75% very/somewhat concerned) and;
- At a higher risk of contracting COVID-19 (71% very/somewhat concerned)

## **UPSHOT**

*The COVID-19 pandemic has shifted the very framework of young Canadians lives. The pandemic has disrupted how youth learn, how they and whether they can work, and most important, how they connect and engage with their peers. But these are not the only impacts.*

The shift towards touchless, digital interactions over in-person, has changed how young Canadians access education and employment opportunities but it has also changed how they can connect with their close networks, and the wider community around them. This is felt more strongly by those who already faced challenges accessing these connections prior to the pandemic.

On the surface youth might say they are alright, but the pandemic has eroded many familiar structures and brought on additional stresses in nearly all areas of their lives.

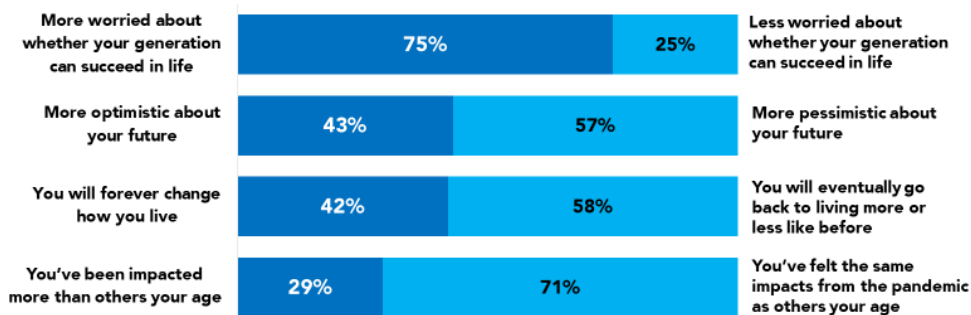
As youth continue to navigate through this world disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, it will be important to provide them with opportunities to re-engage with employment, education and social connections.

## WHAT DO THEY THINK ABOUT THE IMPACTS TO THEIR FUTURE?

*Looking long-term, youth are worried and uncertain about their futures, but are keenly aware that there are others who may be facing greater challenges.*

No doubt the pandemic has caused greater uncertainty for the future of Canadian youth. Three in four say the pandemic has left them feeling more worried about the success of their generation. Outlooks vary by demographic groups though.

### HOW HAS THE PANDEMIC AFFECTED YOU...?



Has the pandemic made you feel...

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Those who are feeling most pessimistic about their future are:

- Young (15-17) youth who live in lower income households (68%)
- Those who live alone (64%)
- Youth identifying as a racial/ethnic minority (63%)
- Those living in Ontario (62%)

Four in ten say they the pandemic will forever change how they live. This sentiment is stronger among older youth, those who identify as female, and those who are unemployed.

Despite facing a multitude of challenges, very few young Canadians say they are worse off than others their age (only 19%). There is a relationship between feeling better off and being from a higher socio-economic situation, but most say they are feeling the impacts the same way as everyone else.

## **UPSHOT**

*Like most predictions about the general population, the impacts of the pandemic on youth are likely going to be long-lasting. Sectors that employ larger numbers of young Canadians are expected to bounce back last, and youth are also likely to face setbacks with their education and social development.*

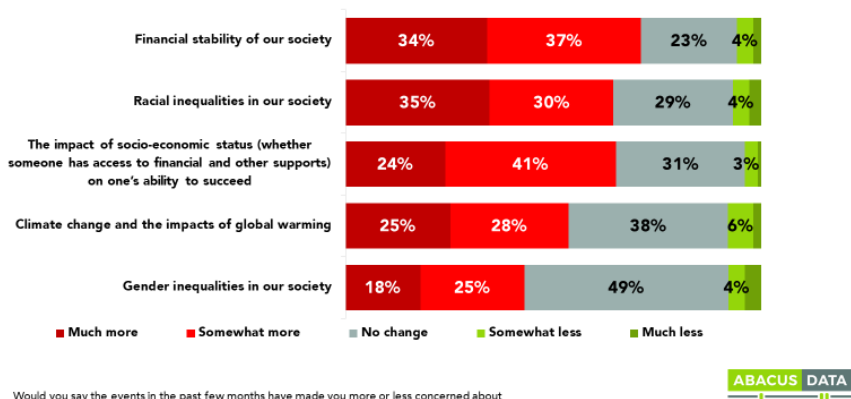
The recovery plan for Canada should acknowledge the number of disruptions the pandemic has had for these generations early on in their lives, and create a framework where they can continue to grow to their full potential, while acknowledging not all experiences are the same.

## **THE WIDER PICTURE**

*Aside from a global pandemic there have been growing concerns about other issues in our society, and Canadian youth are paying attention to these too. These have added compounding stresses to the lives of youth.*

Police violence towards racialized communities, widespread forest fires, and greater setbacks of women in the workforce have exposed problems with racial and gender inequality, climate change, and more within our society. This is reflected in the perceptions of youth. There are widespread concerns about racial inequality (65%), the impact of socio-economic status on success (65%), climate change (53%), and gender inequality (43%).

## CONCERNED ABOUT...



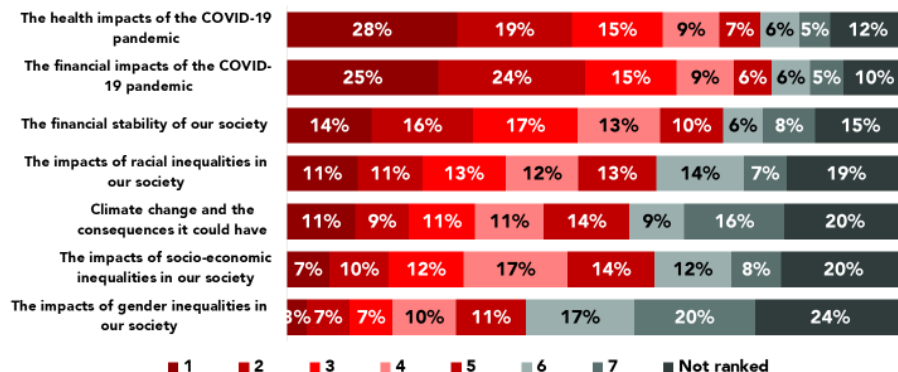
Not surprisingly, those who are directly impacted by these issues are most concerned:

- 76% of those who identify as a racial/ethnic minority are concerned about racial inequalities.
- 50% of female identifying youth are increasingly concerned about gender inequality.
- 75% of youth from lower-income households are concerned about the impacts of socio-economic background on success.

These additional societal challenges are placing compounding pressures on this cohort. The direct impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are the top concerns, but all youth are facing additional and compounding pressures. Only 1% of those surveyed said the only stresses they face are a direct consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic.



## ARE YOU STRESSED ABOUT...(RANK THE FOLLOWING)



Let's think about the different sources of stress in your own life. Please rank the following from having the biggest impact on your mental health, to the least impact. If you feel like it has had no impact, don't select it.



When asked to rank the sources of stress in their lives, responses are strongly related to one’s personal situation. Those identifying as a member of a racialized community rank racial inequalities as a greater concern. Similarly, those who are female-identifying are more concerned about gender inequalities and those living in lower income households are more concerned about the impact of socio-economic inequalities.

Perhaps most interesting are the perceptions about the interconnectedness between these issues and the pandemic. Half (50%) believe the pandemic has just exposed inequalities that were already present in our society. A third (29%) say the other events that have happened are not at all related to the pandemic, and 21% believe the pandemic has created greater inequality in our society aside from other preexisting problems.

## 'WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING DO YOU AGREE WITH MOST?



\*Which of the following do you agree with most?

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Propensity to respond to this question is largely based on one's background. Those who are male identifying, do not identify as a racial/ethnic minority, or come from higher income households are the most likely to say that the pandemic and these other challenges are not at all related.

Youth who are female identifying, identify as part of a racial/ethnic minority, or live in lower income households are more likely to say these inequalities are preexisting, and exposed by the pandemic.

### UPSHOT

*Overall, there is awareness and concern about the growing number of social issues beyond the pandemic. But the consequences of this situation are not felt equally among all youth. Those who are more likely to be personally impacted by an issue, feel greater consequences. They don't blame these challenges on the pandemic alone. Instead, they say that these challenges have been in our society all along, and they just more exposed now than ever.*

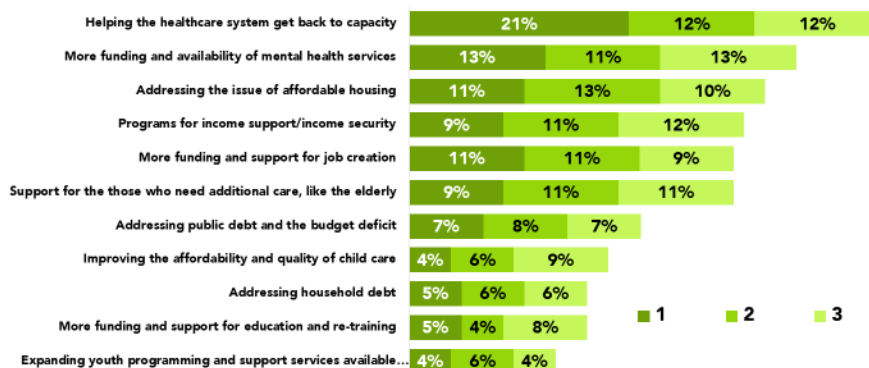
More than anything this reinforces the opinion that the impacts of the pandemic, in particular the indirect impacts, are the largest among those who are already facing challenges, whether it be from socioeconomic status, or discrimination based on race/ethnicity and gender identity.

## PANDEMIC RECOVERY: THE YOUTH PERSPECTIVE

*Youth want a comprehensive recovery policy that focuses on those most in need, providing long-term solutions that not only address the consequences of the pandemic, but the pre-existing inequalities as well.*

Canadian youth are looking for a comprehensive recovery plan- every policy issue proposed in the survey received the support of 90% or more of youth. Of the issues, youth place the greatest importance on: helping the healthcare system get back to capacity (45% place this in the top 3), more funding to mental health services (37% top 3), and addressing the issue of affordable housing (34% top 3). Nearly two thirds (62%) say the implementation of these solutions should focus just as much on the long-term impacts as the short-term.

### TOP 3 YOUTH ISSUES GOV'T SHOULD ADDRESS

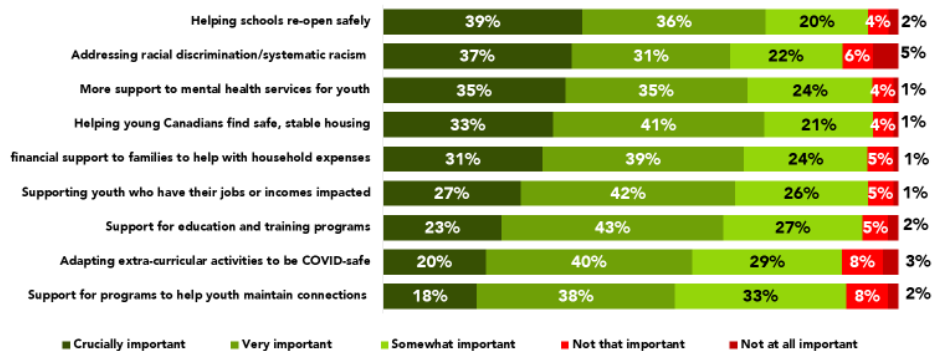


When it comes to issues affecting youth today, which three do you think should be the greatest priority for governments to address



There is also a lot of importance placed on issues directly relating to youth.

## IMPORTANCE OF YOUTH POLICIES



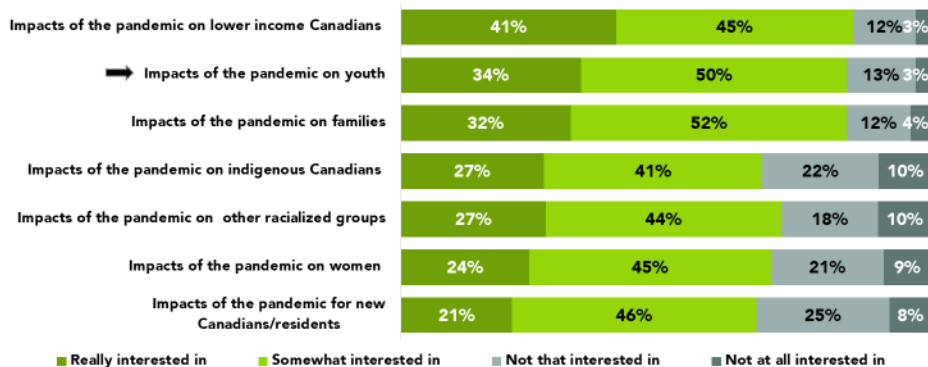
How important are each of the following for recovery?

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Again, over 90% of youth see the importance in everything from support programs for youth to maintain social connections (90% say this is important), to helping schools reopen safely (94%), and addressing racial discrimination/systematic racism (89%- with 37% saying this is crucially important for recovery).

Above all else, Canadian youth want to see solutions that focus on helping those that need it most. More are keenly interested in solutions that focus on lower income Canadians than those that focus on youth. And those that want a youth-focused recovery plan the most are from lower income households.

## WHAT KIND OF COVID-19 RECOVERY PLAN WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE?

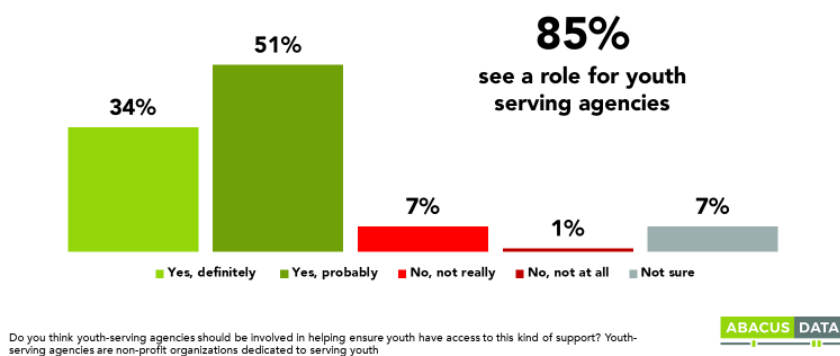


The government is working on plans for a recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, to help Canadians who have been impacted. What kind of recovery plan would you like to see from the government?

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Youth are also perceptive to the magnitude of effort required to implement a comprehensive plan. As it pertains to solutions for youth, 85% see a role for youth serving agencies in providing some support.

## DO YOU THINK YOUTH-SERVING AGENCIES CAN HELP?



And they are also keen to help out themselves. 20% of youth have delivered food/supplies to a loved one or community member, and 12% have organized donations for a cause.

Aside from donations of supplies and funds, youth are eager to start a conversation about the issues around them and implement changes to their own lives where they can. Since the onset of the pandemic, 46% have started a conversation about social issues with their friends/peers, and 35% of all youth feel this is a way they can help contribute to recovery efforts in the pandemic.

A third have also taken steps to improve their own mental health, by starting a new routine or wellness activity. The same number also see this as a way to contribute to recovery.

## UPSHOT

*Youth want a plan that deals with the issues faced by youth but also doesn't leave anyone out, particularly those in marginalized communities and those who were facing challenges even before the pandemic began. With this in mind, youth want to see solutions that focus on the long-term impacts of the pandemic, addressing systematic issues like*

systematic discrimination, and social inequalities that provide difficulties in accessing healthcare, affordable housing, and income security.

The plan they envision is bold, but youth are ready to be involved in the conversation, and they envision a solution that isn't carried by government alone.

## **CONCLUSION**

Youth have faced unprecedented challenges to their education, incomes, social connections, and paths for their future. Their outlook on life, while less optimistic than last summer, is still largely positive and youth are doing their best to manage their situations, despite the pandemic.

Despite this resilience, there is still opportunity for real consequences on the lives of Canadian youth.

Right now, governments and society should focus efforts on helping youth build and maintain their social connections to their community, ensuring they have access to the supports that are so crucial for their education, career development, and mental health.

And looking to the future, we need to work together to ensure that, despite the setbacks of these past few months, youth still have access to opportunities to succeed, particularly marginalized youth who have faced barriers to success long before the pandemic.

## METHODOLOGY

The web survey was conducted with 1,000 Canadian youth aged 15 to 30 from September 9<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> 2020. A random sample of panelists were invited to complete the survey from a set of blended panels.

The margin of error for a comparable probability-based random sample of the same size is +/- 3.1%, 19 times out of 20.

The data were weighted according to census data to ensure that the sample matched the target population according to age, gender, educational attainment, and region. Totals may not add up to 100 due to rounding.