

DATA DIVE WITH NIK NANOS

THE SILENT PANDEMIC

The economy is stabilizing and vaccines are rolling out, but the mental well-being of Canadians is currently on the decline

OPINION

Nik Nanos is the chief data scientist at Nanos Research, a global fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, a research professor at the State University of New York in Buffalo and the official pollster for The Globe and Mail and CTV News.

Our topsy-turvy lives are now in year two, and wave three, of the pandemic. Our political leaders are focused on fighting the virus and managing the economic fallout. These are quite rightly priorities. But there is a third pillar – mental health – that needs to be addressed just as aggressively.

Where are we today? The battle against COVID-19 may very well be moving from pandemic to endemic, where variants remain part of our lives for the foreseeable future. As a result, many are preparing for the need for booster shots – becoming human pincushions to protect themselves and their loved ones. On that front, science and public health best practices are our clearest means to victory.

Efforts to help the economy are also in full swing. Governments around the world are using stimulus money to help citizens and businesses weather the fallout. The full disruption of the pandemic has not yet registered and realistically will not be known until after the government spending spigot is turned off. For now, the potentially negative economic curve has been flattened as governments have stepped in to mask the future economic disruption that will come.

Asked about the future strength of the Canadian economy in the next six months, according to the weekly Bloomberg Nanos Canadian Confidence Index, people remain positive in anticipation of a post-COVID-19 world.

The question is, then: With vaccines rolling out and economic turnaround full steam ahead, why are Canadians so grumpy?

Since January, Nanos has been tracking views on the rollout of vaccines. After a rise in confidence in February, when Canada's vaccination efforts really started to get under way, scores for the federal government and most provincial governments have declined. When asked, on a scale of 0 to 10, how they'd rate the job the federal government is doing with the vaccine rollout, respondents gave the Liberals scores of 4.9 in March and 5.2 out of 10 in April. Similarly,

Canadians rated their provincial governments a 5.6 out of 10 collectively in April.

Why would Canadians give their governments poor scores when more people are getting their pandemic jab and receiving cheques in the mail to help them pay the bills?

Research suggests that we are losing the pandemic battle on the mental-health front. This has put a spotlight on the lacking response to what should be the third major pillar of pandemic government action – mental health.

One would think that after a year of self-isolation that Canadians would be better at

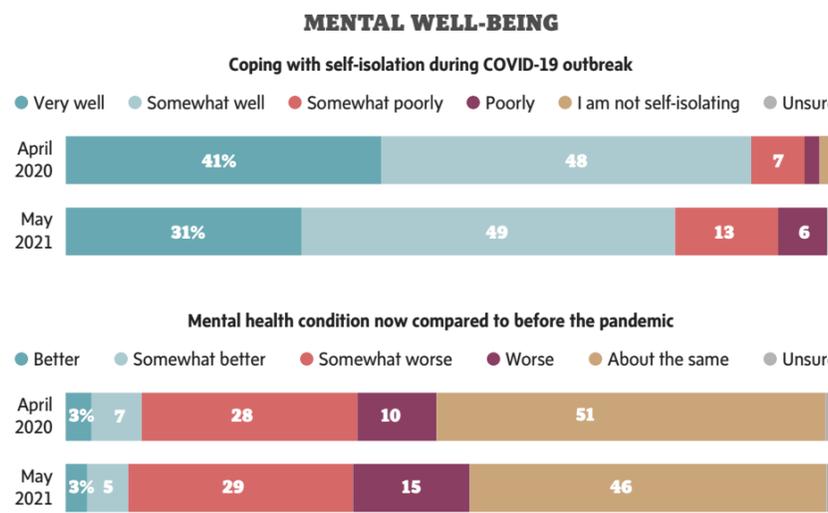
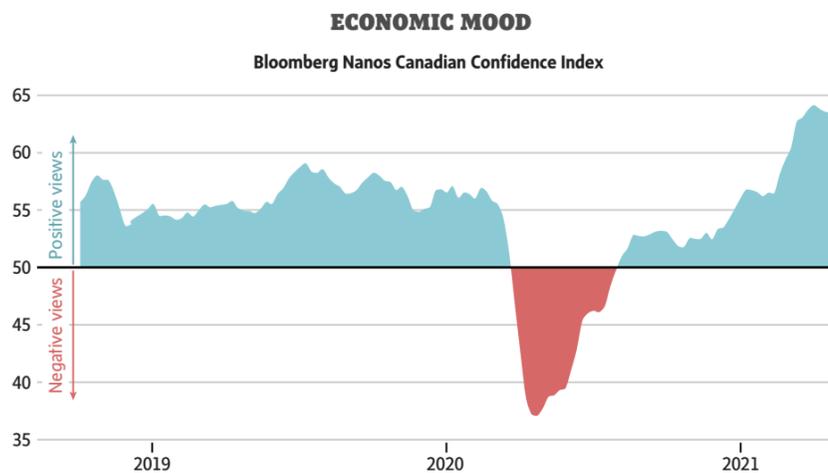
Asked about the state of their mental health compared with before the pandemic in April, 2020, 38 per cent said their mental health was worse or somewhat worse. This has since risen six percentage points to 44 per cent.

copied and managing their mental health – adjusting to new work, home, family and social realities.

Polling indicates that fewer people say they are coping very well and more are reporting that their mental health is worse than before the pandemic.

In April, 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic, 41 per cent reported they were coping very well with self-isolation. This has dropped a full 10 percentage points a year later. At the same time, the proportion of Canadians who say they are coping poorly or somewhat poorly with self-isolation has doubled to about 19 per cent from about 8 per cent.

Canadians on the economy and their mental health



MURAT YÜKSELIR / THE GLOBE AND MAIL, SOURCE: NANOS RESEARCH

Did you get an AstraZeneca vaccine? You made the right call, according to economics

BLAKE SHAFFER
STEPHEN GORDON
ANDREW LEACH
CHRISTINE NEILL
TAMMY SCHIRLE
TREVOR TOMBE

OPINION

Blake Shaffer is an assistant professor of economics at the University of Calgary.

Stephen Gordon is professeur titulaire at Université Laval.

Andrew Leach is an associate professor at the Alberta School of Business.

Christine Neill is an associate professor of economics at Wilfrid Laurier University.

Tammy Schirle is a professor of economics at Wilfrid Laurier University.

Trevor Tombe is an associate professor of economics at the University of Calgary.

Five of the six authors received the AstraZeneca vaccine as their first dose.

Economics has a term for when the private actions of an individual confer costs or benefits on other people. We call it an externality.

Economists often focus on “negative externalities,” which are associated with bad things, such as pollution or littering. If I

do those things and only care about what affects me, I won't take into account how my actions impose costs on others. The result: We get too much of these bad things. This is why climate change is such a challenge to tackle.

But there are also positive externalities, and the COVID-19 pandemic has shone a spotlight on a classic example: vaccines. When you get your shot, you receive the private benefit of being better protected against the virus, while also conferring benefits on others; by being less susceptible to infection, you're one less link in the transmission chain of the virus, making infection in others less likely. Vaccination also reduces the likelihood that an infection leads to hospitalization, reducing strain on our public-health system. These public benefits are a massive reason why we vaccinate: to protect ourselves, yes, but also to protect others.

This is important to remember in the wake of analysis from the National Advisory Committee on Immunizations (NACI) and other public-health experts on the risks and rewards of getting vaccines from the pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca (AZ), as compared with waiting for mRNA vaccines from firms such as Pfizer or Moderna. The AZ vaccines are effective against the novel coronavirus, but they have been associated with very rare blood clots, distinct from run-of-the-mill ones because of how they are formed and their higher degree of lethality, which does decline when people know of the risks and how to re-

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spond. The expert analysis has been meticulous and evidence-based, and it has shifted views on administering AZ as first doses; Ontario health officials have “temporarily” pulled them from circulation this week. When making their recommendations, health experts are comparing your very small likelihood of developing a potentially fatal blood clot against the benefit of lowered chances of dying (or having a stint in the ICU) from COVID-19 while waiting for a different vaccine.

The benefit of getting vaccinated with AZ has changed over the past few weeks. While the risk of blood clots remains very low – even if slightly higher than early estimates – Canada is now receiving millions of mRNA vaccines every week, meaning wait times to receive an alternative vaccine have shrunk. As a result, it may well be the case that the decision to no longer use AZ for first doses in certain jurisdictions is now the right medical decision (and as economists, we are unqualified and unwilling to debate that). If so, governments should get efficacious AZ doses to places without the luxury of choice.

But to get to that determination, we shouldn't only be comparing private risks with private rewards for individual vaccine takers. We must not ignore the transmission-chain and public-health benefits provided by getting shots into arms as soon as possible. Analysis focused solely on private risks and private rewards, while useful for individual decision-making, ignores the

important public-health benefit of vaccination – or, for economists like us, the *positive externality* – which is to protect others, not just ourselves.

Many will reasonably ask: “Why should I take any personal risk just to protect others?” This is fair, and individuals should know their private risk-reward tradeoff before making decisions. But they should also know they are conveying benefits to others in taking the first vaccine available, and public-health officials should be loudly sharing that information. If people choose to consider the benefit that accrues to others when taking the vaccine, they protect you in doing so. If we all take this view, we all protect one another; if only private benefits are considered, the outcome is worse for all.

Those who stepped up to get vaccinated with AZ when called upon should take comfort in two things. First, you made the right choice for you. Case counts were high, and the vaccine's protection mattered. Second, you helped to protect others and improved our public health; indeed, the flush of mRNA vaccines now is in part a result of Canadians who took AZ, moving others up in the queue. Every Canadian that opted to take AZ reduced the chances that other people got sick and helped get us more quickly to a point where we can travel, visit relatives, and reopen schools and businesses.

So thank you for doing that. Or, to use our jargon in a heartfelt way: Your positive externality should not be ignored.

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The next time you go out for your physically-distant walk, count your neighbours. Whether you include yourself or not, more than four in 10 report a deteriorating state of mental health – worse than before the pandemic and even worse than a year ago during the first wave.

While we talk about vaccinations and the economy, this is the other, silent pandemic that is ravaging Canadians and their loved ones. We can learn several things from the research. First, beyond the public-health and economic threat, one must recognize there is a deeper and potentially more long-term mental wellness problem that the pandemic has unleashed.

Second, Canadians are likely to reward consistent action and punish flip-flops or inconsistencies. This is a key message for both governments and for public-health officials. Persistent and understandable policies to fight the pandemic are more likely to garner confidence than stop-and-go measures on workplaces and schools.

When organizations such as the National Advisory Council on Immunization create confusion about vaccine, everyone loses. Consistent messaging needs to encompass personal and economic health as well as mental well-being.

Third, in the same way that many employers and governments very quickly embraced telework, we need a similarly aggressive investment and strategy that helps Canadians manage their mental health through and after the pandemic. It is troubling that the mental health of Canadians is suffering even while the economy is relatively stable, and vaccination rates are rising.

The very first step to mental wellness is to recognize that there is a problem. Politicians tend to like neat and tidy statistics, such as numbers vaccinated or how many Canadians are employed. Mental health does not lend itself to a short snippet proof point.

At the very heart of the matter are three simple yet powerful words: “Are you okay?”

Once everyone is vaccinated and the economy is strong, if Canadians are “not okay” when it comes to their mental health, will we really have defeated the virus?