

PUBLIC VIEWS ON SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES RESEARCH

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EKOS
Research Associates Inc.

BACKGROUND

The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) commissioned Ekos Research Associates to conduct a survey of Canadians regarding their understanding and views on social sciences and humanities research.

Previous work conducted by Ekos Research¹ revealed largely favourable top-of-mind impressions regarding social sciences and humanities research, although Canadians expressed somewhat less favourable views about this type of research compared to research in the natural sciences or health/environmental sciences. Further probing of this issue, however, revealed a strong perceived connection between social sciences and humanities research and key societal issues such as developing a highly qualified and adaptable workforce, and developing new knowledge to help social problems like poverty, crime and terrorism.

The purpose of this study was to revisit Canadians' attitudes toward social science and humanities research to help SSHRC in its policy and program development.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this study involved a nationally-representative telephone survey of the general public regarding their views on social sciences and humanities research. The survey was conducted between May 27 and June 4, 2008. A total of 1005 interviews were completed with Canadian residents 18 years of age and older.

The results are valid within a margin of error of +/-3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. This margin of error increases for population sub-group results. The data was weighted based on Statistics Canada data according to age, gender and region to ensure that the sample is representative of the general public in Canada aged 18 years and over.

¹ Rethinking Science and Society 2006.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Social sciences and humanities research is aimed at providing a better understanding of human and social behaviour by increasing our knowledge in a range of social, economic, political, and cultural areas. Findings from this study reveal a generally positive outlook on social sciences and humanities research on the part of the public, despite an admitted lack of familiarity with this branch of research.

Familiarity with Social Sciences and Humanities Research

Respondents were asked if they were familiar with social sciences and humanities research in general, and with the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), specifically.

While familiarity with both is generally low, Canadians are twice as likely to say they have some degree of familiarity with research conducted in the field of social sciences and humanities generally (37 per cent), than with SSHRC specifically (17 per cent).

Six in ten Canadians (62 per cent) say they are unfamiliar with research done in the social sciences and humanities, while more than eight in ten (83 per cent) are unfamiliar with SSHRC. These results are largely similar to those found when we last asked this question in 2006.

Support for Research in the Social Sciences and Humanities

To test the impact of providing information about social sciences and humanities research on support for this type of research, half the sample were read an introductory sentence about social sciences and humanities research², and the other half of the sample were not. All respondents were then asked several questions about their support for this type of research.

Survey results reveal that the majority of respondents from both groups agree with the idea that communities, businesses, and society as a whole would benefit from increased access to social sciences and humanities research, however, it is instructive to note that those who were read the introductory sentence prior to this question are somewhat more inclined to agree with this idea (68 per cent versus 63 per cent of those who were not read the introductory sentence).

Results also reveal that more than seven in ten from both groups agree that the federal government should invest in social sciences and humanities research, although those who were read the introductory sentence are slightly more likely to strongly agree with this idea.

² "Social sciences and humanities research is aimed at increasing our knowledge in a wide range of areas, such as education, families and health care, immigration, the environment, ethics, economic prosperity, and the study of history and civilizations."

Social Sciences and Humanities Research and Quality of Life

Survey results also suggest that Canadians draw a connection between social sciences and humanities research and our quality of life. Respondents were asked to what extent they thought social sciences and humanities research contributes to a range of areas such as health care, the economy, and the environment. Findings reveal that at least half of Canadians believe that social sciences and humanities research plays an important role across all the areas tested, however, they are particularly likely to see a connection in terms of Canada's overall quality of life (64 per cent), developing new knowledge to help solve health problems (62 per cent), and protecting Canada's environment (59 per cent).

Just over half also feel social sciences and humanities research contributes to the development of new knowledge in the management of natural resources and energy (55 per cent), developing new knowledge in information and communications technologies (54 per cent), developing new knowledge to help solve social problems (54 per cent), and developing a highly qualified and adaptable workforce (53 per cent). At the bottom of the list of tested issues, half of Canadians perceive a connection between social sciences and humanities research and improving Canada's economic prospects.