

COVID-19
Canada



THE END OF THE WORLD
AS WE KNOW IT?

RESEARCH REPORT N° 8

WHEN WILL SOCIETY GET BACK TO NORMAL?

THIS RESEARCH REPORT IS INTENDED FOR
POLICY MAKERS AND THE GENERAL PUBLIC

THE PROJECT IS FINANCED BY THE CANADIAN
INSTITUTES OF HEALTH RESEARCH (CIHR)

Abstract

The COVID-19 crisis has turned society upside down and when there will be a return to “normal” is a question on the minds of all Canadians. There is no consensus among the Canadian population in terms of the projected length of time before society returns to normal. Indeed, our analyses have uncovered four distinct groups: The first group, representing 18.1% of the sample, anticipates a return to normalcy in a few months, i.e., in the “Short term”; the second group, in one year, i.e., in the “Medium term” (48.8%); the third group, in several years, i.e., in the “Long term” (28.1%); and the fourth group (5.1%), says that there will be no return to normalcy, i.e., “Never”. In general, individuals in the “Long term” and “Never” groups report more psychological challenges than individuals who anticipate a “Short term” and “Medium term” return to normalcy. Specifically, Canadians who estimate a longer period of time before society returns to normal report experiencing more emotions of anxiety and anger, and less joy. They also report experiencing less satisfaction with their lives and have a more negative perception of long-term changes in society.

Definitions of key concepts

Concepts	Definitions	Examples of survey questions
Anticipated length of time before society returns to normal	The anticipated length of time before society returns to a state similar to that prior to the COVID-19 crisis.	In your view, when will our society get back to normal? 1 = <i>In a few days</i> , 2 = <i>In a few weeks</i> , 3 = <i>In a few months</i> , 4 = <i>In a year</i> , 5 = <i>In many years</i> , 6 = <i>Never</i>
Emotions felt (emotions of anxiety, anger and loneliness, and of joy)	The level of emotion felt during the COVID-19 crisis.	During the past week, because of the COVID-19 crisis, I often felt... 1 = <i>Strongly disagree</i> – 10 = <i>Strongly agree</i>
Level of life satisfaction in general	The degree to which people are satisfied with their life in general.	In most ways, my life is close to my ideal. The conditions of my life are excellent. I am satisfied with my life. So far, I have gotten the important things I want in life. If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing. 1 = <i>Strongly disagree</i> – 10 = <i>Strongly agree</i>
Perception of long-term changes in society	The degree to which people believe that the long-term changes caused by the COVID-19 crisis will be negative on society in general.	In the long term, do you think the overall changes related to the COVID-19 crisis will be negative or positive for our society? 1 = <i>Extremely positive</i> – 10 = <i>Extremely negative</i>



Research questions

The COVID-19 pandemic radically altered the functioning and social norms of our society. Canadians quickly had to adapt their behaviours and routines in order to limit the spread of the virus. The magnitude of these sudden changes no doubt alters people's conception of the world and society. With the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, Canadians began wondering about when they might expect a return to normalcy in terms of their own lives and society as a whole. In this report, two main research questions are addressed: 1) What is the pattern of Canadians' perceptions about the anticipated length of time before society returns to normal?, and 2) Is the perception of the anticipated duration before the return to normal associated with Canadians' mental health?

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, many events may have influenced and may still be influencing our perception of our society. For example, variation in the daily number of reported cases, hospitalizations or confirmed deaths related to COVID-19 can greatly influence people's perceptions of society. This is also the case for the addition and removal of health measures such as the imposition of face coverings, the resilience or fragility of the health system, and scientific developments toward vaccines. Indeed, all these aspects can have an impact on the perception of the crisis and society, and therefore also on the evolution of the anticipated length of time before the return to normalcy.

While some individuals will be more optimistic that their society will quickly return to normalcy, other individuals may anticipate that it will take much longer, or that their society will never return to normal. On multiple occasions in the scientific literature, researchers have demonstrated positive associations between optimism - positive expectations about the future - and markers of better psychological health. Thus, in a context like that of the COVID-19 crisis, it is reasonable to address the association of expectations about the future of society with Canadians' mental health experiences.

Hypotheses






1. Canadians' perceptions of the anticipated length of time before society returns to normal will change over the course of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. Perceptions will not remain static across the ten measurement times from April 2020 to December 2020.
2. The anticipated length of time before society returns to normal will vary across individuals. For example, while some people will think that society will return to normal very quickly, some will think that it will take a long time. Thus, it will be possible to group together people with a similar pattern of anticipated length of time before society returns to normal.
3. Finally, individuals who anticipate a more distant return to normalcy will also report more negative psychological health than individuals who anticipate a more rapid return to normalcy.



Method

This study is part of a larger longitudinal study of the psychological impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on Canadians. The data in this report were extracted from a representative sample of Canadians (N = 3617), who completed an in-depth eleven measurement questionnaire between April 6, 2020, and May 5, 2021. For information on procedures and methodology, please consult our technical report (de la Sablonnière et al., 2020).

Table 1. Methodological and demographic information

 Measurement time	 Sample size	 % (n) Women	 Mean age (range)	 Survey Dates
1	3617	50.5% (1827)	48 (18-92)	6 April - 6 May 2020
2	2282	48.9% (1115)	49 (18-86)	21 Avril - 11 May 2020
3	2369	49.2% (1165)	49 (18-86)	4 May - 25 May 2020
4	2296	48.5% (1113)	49 (18-86)	18 May - 10 June 2020
5	2154	48.7% (1048)	49 (18-92)	1 June - 23 June 2020
6	2116	48.8% (1033)	49 (18-92)	15 June - 13 July 2020
7	2072	49.1% (1017)	50 (18-92)	13 July - 8 August 2020
8	1871	49.4% (924)	50 (18-92)	17 August - 13 September 2020
9	1821	48.4% (882)	52 (18-92)	21 September - 19 October 2020
10	1883	48.4% (911)	50 (18-86)	25 November - 28 December 2020

In order to test our hypotheses, group-based trajectory modelling analysis (Nagin, 1999) were conducted with data from measurement times 2 through 9. The purpose of these analyses is to group individuals into different trajectories according to the evolution of the “anticipated length of time before society returns to normal”.

Then, the belonging to the trajectories of anticipated length of time before the return to normal in society was used to determine whether individuals differed on the following variables: levels of emotions felt, levels of satisfaction with life, and perception of long-term changes in society.



Results

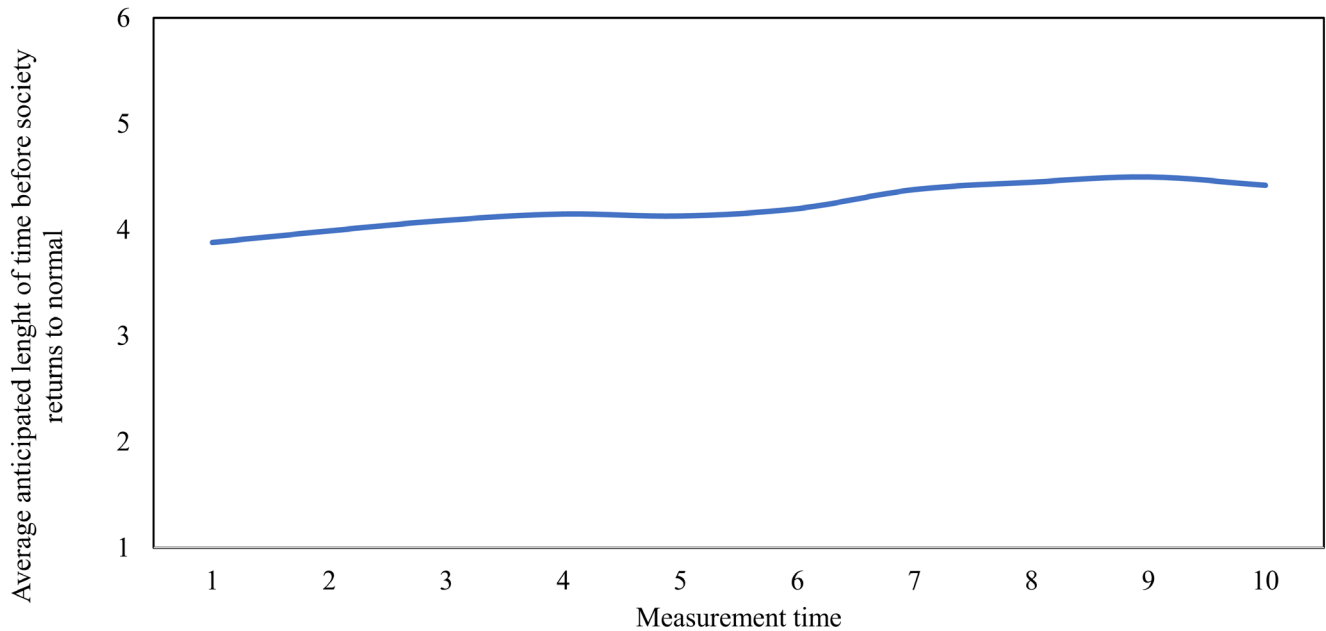
Measurement scale	
1	In a few days
2	In a few weeks
3	In a few months
4	In a year
5	In many years
6	Never

Legend to interpret the results of anticipated length of time before society returns to normal.

Our results allow us to corroborate our three hypotheses.

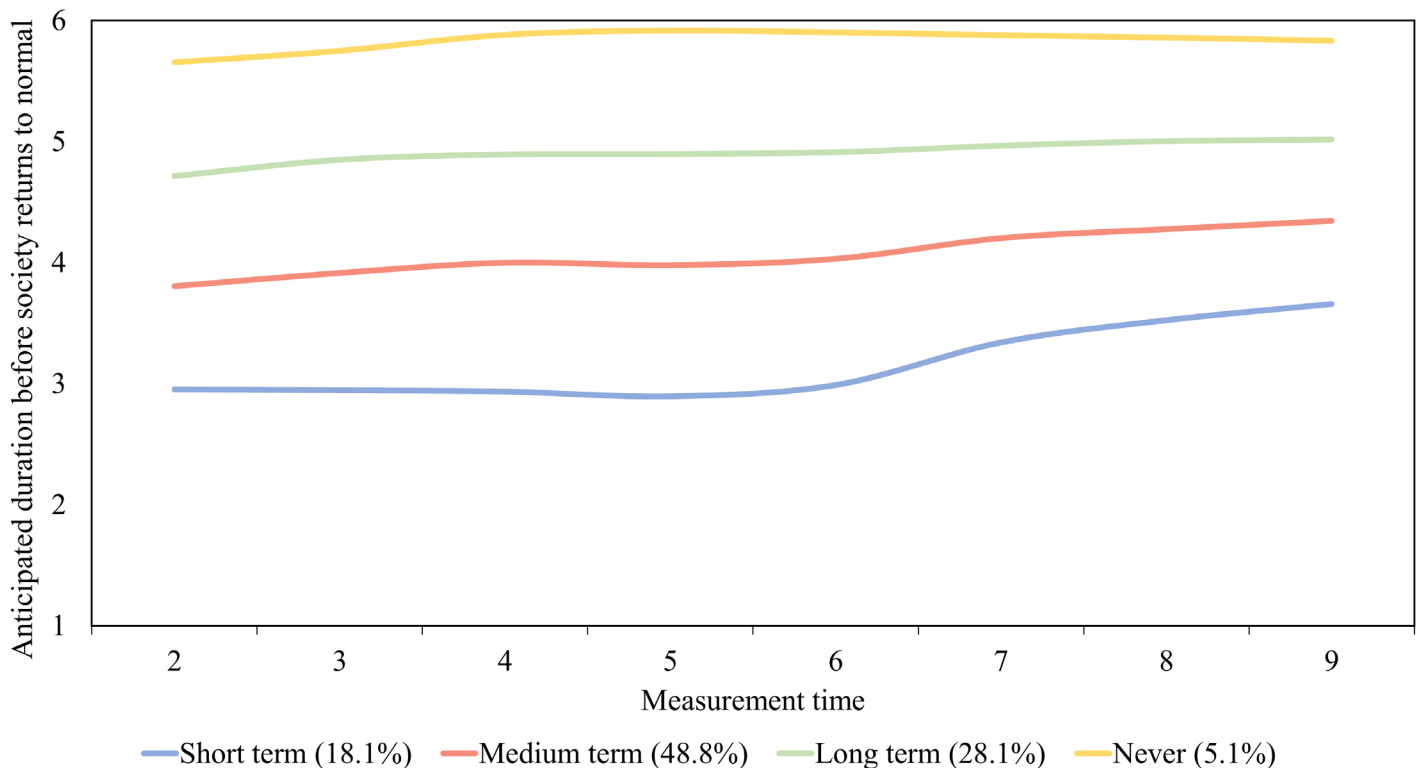
Hypothesis 1. Canadians' perception of the anticipated length of time before society returns to normal changes over time. Specifically, throughout the crisis, it gradually increases - the more time passes, the more Canadians perceive that the return to societal normalcy will be distant (Graph 1).

Graph 1. Evolution of the anticipated length of time before society returns to normal



Hypothesis 2. The anticipated length of time before society returns to normal varies across individuals (Graph 2). Indeed, group trajectory modelling analysis indicates that participants can be divided into four groups. The first group anticipates a return to normalcy in a few months (18.1%), the second group in a year (48.8%), the third group in several years (28.1%) and the fourth group asserts that there will be no return to normalcy (5.1%). Therefore, we named these groups: 1) “Short term”, 2) “Medium term”, 3) “Long term” and 4) “Never”.

Graph 2. Group identification



Hypothesis 3. In general, anticipating a more distant return to a normal society (individuals in the “Long term” and “Never” groups) is associated with higher levels of psychological impacts (Graph 3, 4 and 5).

Level of anxiety

Individuals in the group anticipating a return to societal normalcy in the “Short term” report significantly lower levels of anxiety ($M = 4.72$, $SD = 2.41$) than individuals in the “Medium term” ($M = 5.21$, $SD = 2.44$) and “Long term” ($M = 5.44$, $SD = 2.50$) groups, and marginally lower levels than individuals in the “Never” group ($M = 5.51$, $SD = 2.63$) (Graph 3).

Level of anger

Individuals in the group anticipating a return to societal normalcy in the “Short term” report significantly lower levels of emotions of anger ($M = 5.41$, $SD = 2.63$) than individuals in the “Never” group ($M = 6.32$, $SD = 2.93$), as well as marginally lower levels than individuals in the “Long term” group ($M = 5.91$, $SD = 2.75$). Individuals in the “Medium term” group ($M = 5.60$, $SD = 2.63$) report marginally lower levels of anger than those in the “Never” group (Graph 3).

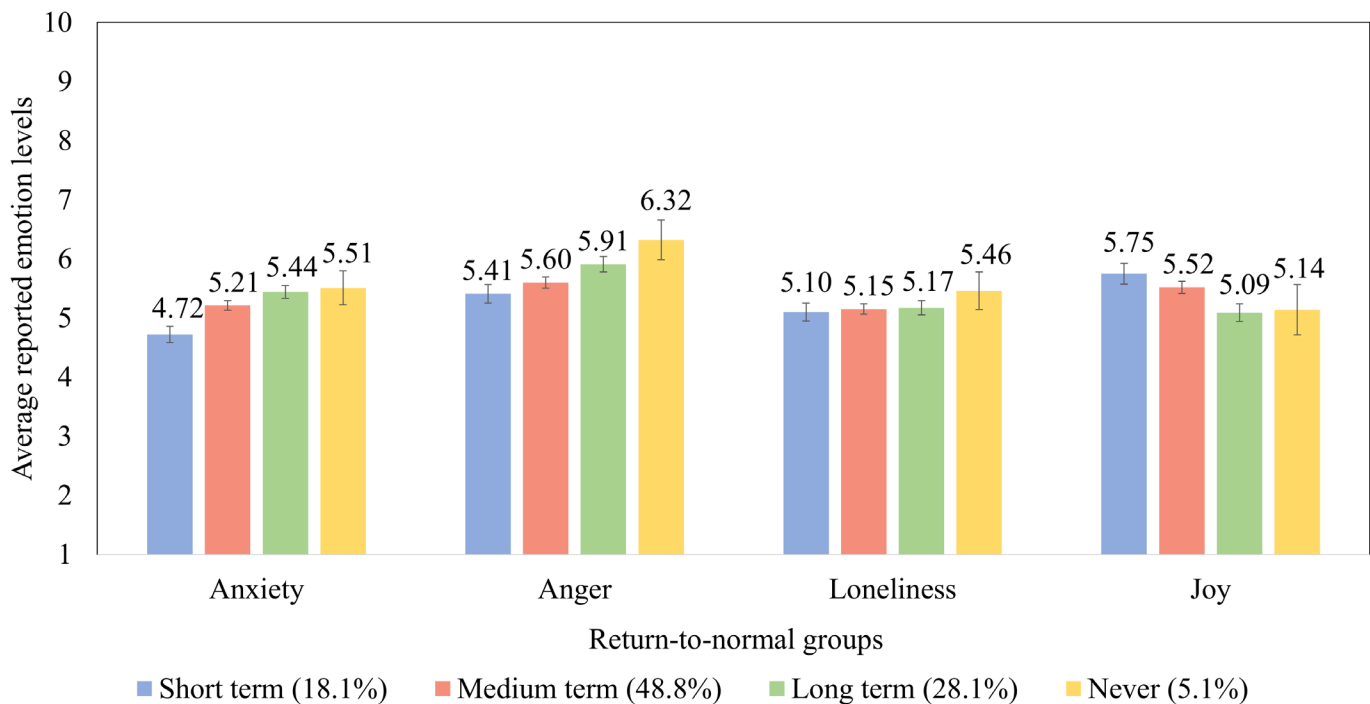
Level of loneliness

Regarding the level of perceived loneliness, no significant difference was observed between the different groups. This may seem contradictory because a visual analysis of Graph 3 suggests that there are differences between individuals in the “Never” group and individuals in the other three groups. However, rigorous statistical analyses indicate that these differences do not reach statistical significance.

Level of joy

Individuals in the group anticipating a return to societal normalcy in the “Short term” report significantly higher levels of joy ($M = 5.75$, $SD = 2.51$) than those in the “Long term” group ($M = 5.09$, $SD = 2.70$). Individuals in the “Medium term” group ($M = 5.52$, $SD = 2.58$) report experiencing a marginally higher levels of joy than those in the “Long term” group ($M = 5.09$, $SD = 2.70$) (Graph 3).

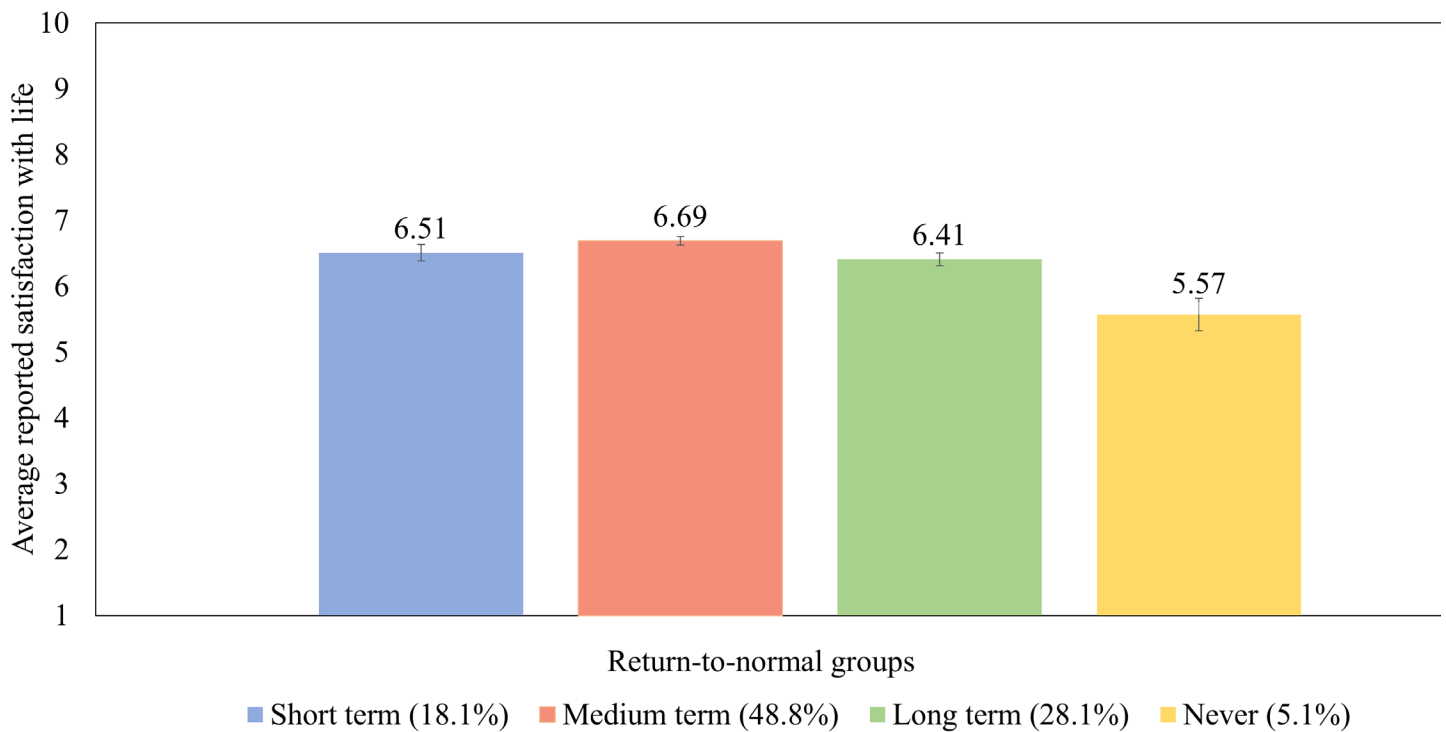
Graph 3. Reported level of emotions for each return-to-normal group



Life satisfaction

Individuals in the group not anticipating a return to societal normalcy (“Never” group) report being significantly less satisfied with their lives in general ($M = 5.57$, $SD = 2.22$) than individuals in the “Short term” ($M = 6.51$, $SD = 2.10$), “Medium term” ($M = 6.69$, $SD = 1.90$), and “Long term” ($M = 6.41$, $SD = 2.23$). Individuals in the “Long term” group report being marginally less satisfied with their lives in general than those in the “Medium term” group (Graph 4).

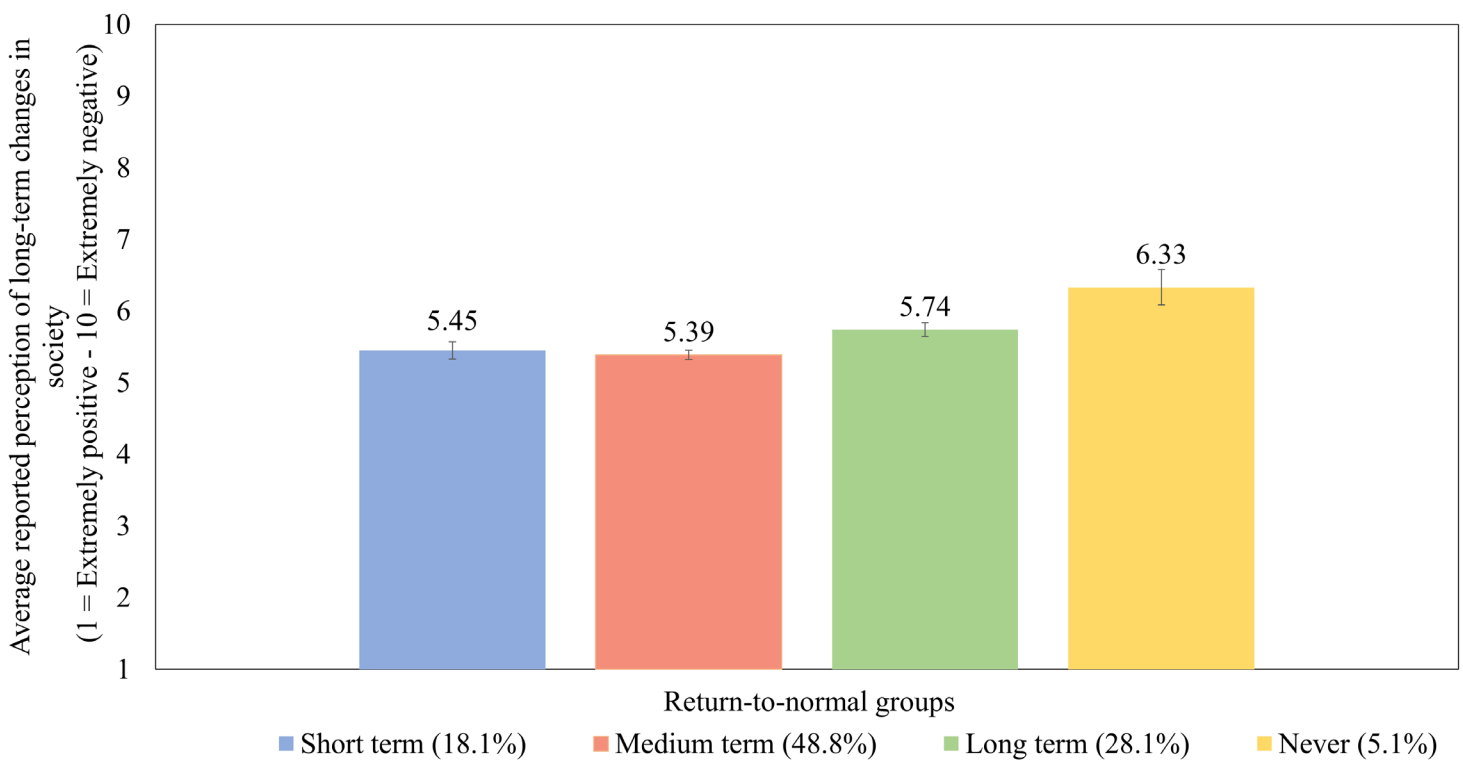
Graph 4. Reported levels of satisfaction with life for each return-to-normal group



Perception of long-term changes in society

Individuals in the group anticipating a return to societal normalcy in the “Short term” perceive the societal changes made during the COVID-19 crisis as significantly less negative ($M = 5.45$, $SD = 2.21$) than individuals in the “Never” group ($M = 6.33$, $SD = 2.86$). Individuals in the “Medium term” group perceived these changes significantly less negatively ($M = 5.39$, $SD = 2.02$) than individuals in the “Long term” ($M = 5.74$, $SD = 2.31$) and “Never” groups (Graph 5).

Graph 5. Perception of long-term changes in society for each return-to-normal group



Conclusion

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, Canadians expect that the length of time before society returns to its pre-crisis state is increasing. Thus, according to our results, Canadians are less and less optimistic that their society will quickly return to a certain normality.

Moreover, individuals classified in trajectories associated with a more distant return to normalcy (“Long-term” and “Never” groups) tend to report poorer psychological health than those who anticipate a quicker return to normalcy. Specifically, participants who projected a longer period before return to normalcy tend to report feeling more emotions of anxiety and anger, less joy, and being less satisfied with their lives compared to those who projected a quicker return to normalcy. Furthermore, their perception of the long-term changes in society is also more negative when compared to their counterparts.

Implications

It is important for policy-makers to consider the following facts:

- The average projected length of time before society returns to normal tends to increase over time for all Canadians. Considering the association between a longer projected time before the return to normalcy of society and poorer psychological health, it is advisable for government leaders to implement collective solutions to support the population’s well-being.
- Furthermore, in order to promote better psychological health of its citizens, it is desirable that government leaders speak with optimism, while remaining realistic about the current situation and the future of society. This is congruent with the fact that participants who were more optimistic about the anticipated length of time before society returns to normal seemed to have better psychological health than other individuals.



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Reference

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Director and founder of the Social Change and Identity Laboratory since 2005, Roxane studies the challenges people face when they are exposed to dramatic social change, such as the colonization that affected Canada's Aboriginal peoples or immigration.

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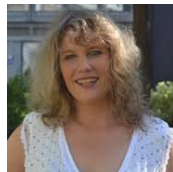
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