

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### *Introduction*

The Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner of Alberta is interested in assessing Albertans' awareness of and views regarding privacy issues. In order to research opinions about privacy, GPC Canada conducted a telephone survey of 604 Albertans during the month of July 2000.

For the purpose of this survey, privacy was considered as *control over the distribution and use of one's personal information*.

The two main survey purposes were:

- To assess public awareness regarding privacy issues and areas of privacy concern.
- To help in design of communication activity carried out by the Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner.

The sample was designed to produce a regional breakdown of 1/3 interviews from each of Edmonton CMA (203 respondents), Calgary (200 respondents) and Balance of Province (201 respondents). This regional breakdown is close to the actual population distribution of Alberta.

For the total sample of 604 respondents, representing the Province of Alberta, the margin of error is a maximum of  $\pm 4\%$  (0.95 level).

### *Highlights of Findings*

This section summarizes the highlights of the survey results.

#### **Demographics**

The sample was evenly divided between greater Edmonton, Calgary and the rest of Alberta. The gender split was equal. There was good representation across age levels (from a minimum of 18 years to a maximum of 74 years), education levels and occupations.

#### **Albertans' Opinions about Privacy Issues**

Albertans expressed strong agreement with the importance of protecting individual privacy in the province (78% in strong agreement).

Just over half (56%) expressed strong agreement with concern about the privacy of their own personal information. For the majority, the level of concern is increasing. Almost

two-thirds (62%) agreed strongly that their concern was stronger now than it was five years ago.

However, smaller numbers agreed that privacy of personal information is at risk in Alberta (35% strongly agreed).

### **Experiences of Breach of Privacy**

28% of the respondents said they had experienced a serious breach of their privacy.

These persons were asked to briefly describe the incident or incidents in question. The answers varied considerably in their depth and candour. They were categorized to the best of our ability by the sector in which the incident took place.

- The most frequent incidents were concerned with mailing lists such as those used by businesses or charities which lead to unsolicited contacts.
- The second most frequent categories concerned financial institutions and credit ratings.
- The third most frequent category concerned government services including gun registration, custody issues, foster care, subpoena issues and others.
- Other incident categories mentioned less often concerned theft of personal materials, phone solicitation, workplace matters, internet hacking, medical records, educational records, police data and insurance matters.

### **Levels of Privacy Concerns, for Specific Information Items**

#### *About Importance of Keeping the Information Safe*

The top tier, highest ratings of importance were for financial data, personal mail and health records. Here is an abbreviated summary.

##### Rating "Very Important"

- 93% - Credit card numbers which you use in restaurants or stores
- 91% - Financial information from your accounts in your bank or credit union
- 85% - Personal correspondence sent through the public mail, with Canada Post
- 83% - Your tax files
- 82% - Information held in credit reports
- 80% - Your own personal health care records

The second tier of ratings of importance were for personal conversations (including cordless phones, cell phones, email and faxed messages), workplace data, and government registry data.

##### Rating "Very Important"

- 79% - Personal conversations on a cordless phone
- 76% - Information about you collected by your employer
- 74% - Information you provide to government registries, such as license bureaus
- 74% - Personal conversation on a cell phone
- 73% - E-mail messages on the Internet
- 71% - Personal information sent over the fax

The third tier of ratings of importance were for information items which may be important to some but not to others. They concern activities which are not universal, including legal problems, Internet use (shopping and surfing), and receipt of government benefits.

Rating “Very Important”

- 61% - Information concerning legal problems you may have had, such as police or criminal records
- 61% - Shopping information over the Internet
- 59% - Information about receiving government benefits, such as Social Assistance or Workers Compensation payments
- 57% - Tracking your actions when you surf on the Internet

The fourth and final tier of ratings of importance were for charitable donations, utility records and traditional shopping data.

Rating “Very Important”

- 45% - Information about your donations to charities
- 39% - Utility records, such as telephone, TV, gas or electricity use
- 36% - Information about your shopping from Air Miles or club cards

***About Concerns About Risk of Misuse of Information***

At least some strong concern about risk of misuse of information was expressed for all the information items. However, those at the top of the list included credit reports, Internet surfing, credit card numbers used when shopping, cell phone conversations, data from financial institutions, shopping information from Internet purchases and information in government registries.

Rating “Very Concerned” (percents based on those saying protection of item had high importance)

- 73% - Information held in credit reports
- 69% - Tracking your actions when you surf on the Internet
- 67% - Credit card numbers which you use in restaurants or stores
- 64% - Personal conversation on a cell phone
- 63% - Financial information from your accounts in your bank or credit union
- 63% - Shopping information over the Internet
- 60% - Information you provide to government registries, such as license bureaus
- 59% - Personal conversations on a cordless phone
- 58% - Your tax files
- 56% - Personal correspondence sent through the public mail, with Canada Post
- 53% - Your own personal health care records
- 53% - Personal information sent over the fax
- 53% - Information about receiving government benefits, such as Social Assistance or Workers Compensation payments
- 51% - E-mail messages on the Internet
- 51% - Information concerning legal problems you may have had, such as police or criminal records
- 46% - Information about you collected by your employer
- 41% - Utility records, such as telephone, TV, gas or electricity use
- 40% - Information about your shopping from Air Miles or club cards
- 38% - Information about your donations to charities

### *About Relation of Importance to Concerns About Risk of Misuse*

For many of the items, the “importance” and the “concern over risk of misuse” are in rough correspondence. In other words, items of high importance tend to show relatively high concern over risk, and items of low importance tend to show relatively low concern over risk.

Three exceptions are “Information collected about you by your employer” which has relatively high importance yet relatively low concern over risk of misuse, and two Internet items (concerning tracking surfing patterns, and shopping data) which have relatively lower importance and higher concern over risk of misuse.

### *About Nature of Risk*

For each item, the concern over risk was identified as theft, or unwanted exposure (others hearing or seeing), or use in an unwanted context (such as sale to mailing lists).

The concern varies by item. For example, the main concern over credit card security is theft. The main concern over cell phone security is others hearing the conversation. The main concern over tax file security is potential misuse of the information.

### **Steps to Protect Privacy**

A high percentage of Albertans (50% exactly of the survey respondents) reported having taken steps to protect their private information. The most common steps were limiting information provided over the Internet or by telephone. Others said they were just “generally cautious” about what they disclosed. More intentional steps such as shredding paper or delisting phone numbers were less frequent.

The other 50% who hadn’t taken steps to protect their private information were asked if they knew whom to approach if they wanted advice. Only one-quarter of them (25% of half) could suggest sources. No one source predominated. The suggestions included: the Internet, government (generally), the Privacy Commissioner, Better Business Bureaus or similar agencies, and others.

### **Awareness of and Support for Privacy Laws**

Overall, 39% said they were aware of government laws designed to protect personal information. The question did not specify jurisdictions, so the answer could have been based upon Alberta laws, federal laws, both or other.

The law with the greatest awareness was Alberta's “FOIP” law (Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act) (26% of total). Based only on persons who had heard of it, support for the FOIP Act was strong with 63% in strong support and very few negative towards it. Bill 40, Alberta’s Health Information Act, was mentioned by only a very small proportion

(8% of total). Amongst this small number, support for Bill 40 ranged from strong to moderate. Recognition for the federal Bill C-6 and Alberta's Fair Trading Act was low (less than 5% of total for both). However, support for these two bills was strong amongst those aware of them.

Only a very small number of persons expressed concerns about privacy laws. Their comments were polarized between those who believed that "the laws were not enforced sufficiently" or that "the laws were extreme".

### **Awareness of the Alberta Information and Privacy Commissioner**

One-third of Albertans (33% of the survey respondents) said they had heard of the Alberta Information and Privacy Commissioner.

### **Confidence in Privacy Protection in Government Service Delivery**

Albertans expressed unease concerning three models of government service delivery which involve the use of their personal information. The question did not specify jurisdictions, so the answer could have been based upon Alberta government services, federal government services, both, or other.

Numbers of the order of 50% expressed "strong concern" over the levels of protection of information connected with Internet-based services or shared situations where multiple services are delivered by one office. Numbers of the order of 40% expressed strong concern over government services provided through private registries. The balance generally expressed "moderate concern", with only very small numbers expressing "no concern".

### **Who Should Protect Privacy?**

This question was based on general sector responsibility and not specific individuals, governments or types of business.

Concerning who was most responsible for protecting privacy, Albertans were almost equally split between saying that Individuals had most responsibility (42%) and that Government had most responsibility (41%). Business was in a very distant third place (4%), and a small minority thought all three had equal responsibility (13%).

### **Differences by Demographics**

Differences by location, age and occupation do exist but are generally small in relation to the magnitude of the overall patterns. For example, by occupation, Professional / senior managerial respondents were more knowledgeable about privacy issues than others, and also less concerned about risks on the Internet than were others. But the differences were only of degree and not of direction. It is safe to assume that the province-wide snapshot

based on the total provincial sample provides an adequate overview of the views of the majority of adult Albertans.

## *Conclusions and Interpretation*

### **Relevant to Survey Validity and Interpretation**

The results of this survey provide an excellent snapshot of the views of adult Albertans. They also provide a baseline for future use.

### **Relevant to the First Survey Purpose, “To assess public awareness regarding privacy issues and areas of privacy concern”.**

Privacy protection is a serious issue with Albertans. Attitudinally, most Albertans support the importance of protecting the privacy of their personal information. Behaviorally, many are already taking steps to do so themselves.

For Albertans, privacy protection is a generalized issue related to conditions of the contemporary social and business environment, and not specifically related to conditions in Alberta. Concern about personal information being at risk specifically in Alberta is not high.

Privacy concerns spread over a wide range of situations. However, some areas are more important, and concern Albertans more, than others. Predictably, the security of financial information is at the top of the list. However, the security of many other types of personal information, including technology-transmitted information, personal conversations and shopping data, is also of concern.

Albertans expressed high to moderate levels of concern about security of information in Internet-based government service delivery models, shared services models and government registries, when these models were explained to them. It is possible that concerns may increase as these service delivery models become more common.

Responsibility for protection of the privacy of personal information is clearly perceived as resting with Individuals or with Government. While this snapshot survey did not probe further into the details, these results clearly affirm an attribution of responsibility both to individuals to monitor the release of their own private information and to government to legislate as needed and to safeguard large amounts of personal data. The fact that so few Albertans attribute primary responsibility for protection of personal information to Business or to “all three” (which by implication includes Business) may indicate general low confidence in business self-regulation of privacy matters.

### **Relevant to the Second Survey Purpose, “To help in design of communication activity carried out by the Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner”.**

An opportunity has been identified for public education on steps which individuals can take to protect themselves, and on the resources and legal protections available to them.