
From Crisis to Recovery: How COVID-19 is Impacting Businesses in Thunder Bay (Part 6)

JANUARY / FEBRUARY 2021 RESULTS

Thunder Bay District COVID-19 Business Impact SURVEY

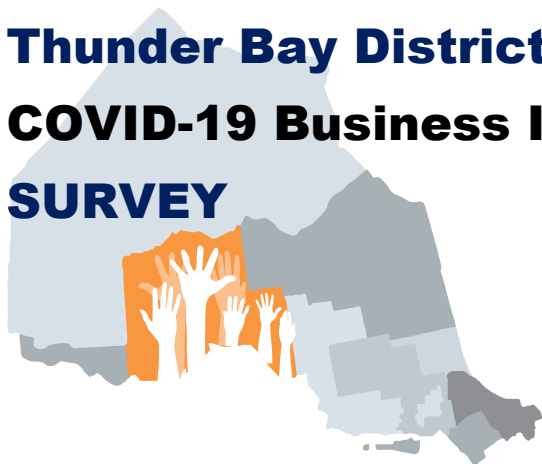




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Partners



Northern Policy Institute is Northern Ontario's independent think tank. They perform research, collect and disseminate evidence, and identify policy opportunities to support the growth of sustainable Northern communities. NPI operations are located in Thunder Bay and Sudbury. They seek to enhance Northern Ontario's capacity to take the lead position on socio-economic policy that impacts Northern Ontario, Ontario, and Canada as a whole.



The North Superior Workforce Planning Board (NSWPB) is one of twenty-six Workforce Planning zones across Ontario, mandated through the Ministry of Labour, Training, and Skills Development to identify, assess and prioritize the skills and knowledge needs of community, employers and individual participants/learners in the local labour market through a collaborative, local labour market planning process.



The Thunder Bay Community Economic Development Commission (CEDC) is responsible for business development, business retention and expansion, entrepreneurial support, opportunity promotion, and collection and assessment of key business data.

They can help with community information and statistics, networking and referrals, assistance in site selection, and labour market data.



The Thunder Bay Chamber of Commerce is a voluntary, member-driven organization of individuals and businesses working together to advance the commercial, financial, and civic interests of the Thunder Bay community. They pool resources to offer member learning opportunities, address policy issues, facilitate connections between members, and aim to bring businesses together to work towards common goals.



Executive Summary

As we all know, the COVID-19 crisis is having a significant impact on the Canadian economy. In response, a COVID-19 business impact survey was made available to employers in the Thunder Bay District to develop an understanding of how the pandemic is affecting business on aspects such as financials, workforce size, service delivery, and long-term viability.

In comparison to the previous surveys, there are some important findings in this month's survey results. For instance, 35 per cent of respondents classified the strategic risk that COVID-19 poses to the long-term prospects of their business as highly negative – a similar result to when this survey was provided last year in April. This is a large increase from the last survey in November (16 per cent). The percentage of businesses that classified the level of risk as medium negative is consistent with the previous survey at 34 per cent. This suggests that concern regarding their long-term business prospects has increased in recent months and some believe they will have to close their business.

For January-February, there was an increase in the percentage of respondents that are experiencing reduced hours, reduced staff, and operating online. It is the highest percentage of respondents that stated having reduced hours and staff since May 2020. It is important to note that the results from this recent survey showed a large increase in the percentage of employers surveyed that indicated they are temporarily or permanently closed since the survey was first released. It is the highest proportion since the first survey in April 2020 which was released during the first provincial lockdown. While we saw a gradually opening of businesses late in the fall, an increasing number of cases led to a province-wide lockdown after December 25, 2020 until February 12, 2021. While the province-wide stay-at-home order was lifted mid-February, April saw the return of another stay-at-home order for the entire province.

The findings that come from this survey are important because they provide community decision makers with an understanding of how some businesses are faring during COVID-19, and how to then respond appropriately. As well, employers and organizations that have succeeded in finding new ways to operate could share this information with their entrepreneur peers, which could benefit the economy and the well-being of the community.



Introduction

COVID-19 has been felt all around the world, and Northern Ontario is no exception. As such, it is important to understand how COVID-19 has impacted our local economies. With this in mind, a survey targeted at businesses was developed in partnership by Northern Policy Institute, North Superior Workforce Planning Board, Thunder Bay Chamber of Commerce, and Thunder Bay Community Economic Development Commission.

The results gathered from these surveys can be used by community partners and government to continue responding appropriately to COVID-19.

Results

The results of Thunder Bay's Business Impact Survey for the month of January/February are summarized below. The survey collection period was between January 27th – February 16th, 2021. During this time, the cumulative number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Ontario increased from 260,370 on January 27th to 287,736 on February 16th (Government of Ontario 2021). Ontario reached the peak of the second wave on January 8, 2021 with 4,249 new daily cases. During the time of this survey, the number of daily cases was steadily declining as the province worked to drastically lower the number of new cases. The government announced a province wide stay at home order after the December holiday that was extended until February 12th. While the province-wide stay-at-home order was lifted mid-February, April saw the return of another stay-at-home order for the entire province.

Since the last survey, the provincial government made changes to the health measures in place under the different colour-coded zones. Specifically, the government made changes to retail section in each zone (Government of Ontario 2021b). Most notable, businesses in the retail sector could remain open even in the grey-lockdown zone. During lockdown, in person shopping is allowed at 25 per cent capacity for most stores apart from supermarkets (and other stores that sell groceries), and pharmacies which are allowed to operate at 50 per cent capacity.

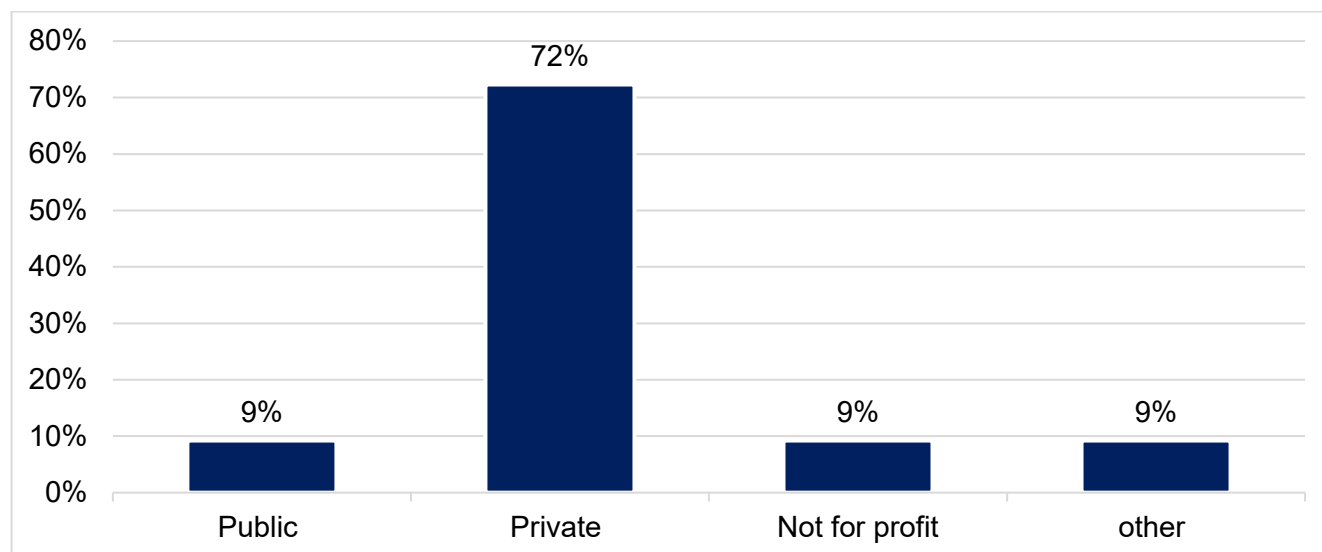
The district of Thunder Bay is one of the regions in Northern Ontario hardest hit in the second wave. The Thunder Bay District Health Unit (TBDHU) reported 321 new cases during this period (Public Health Ontario 2021) and as of March 10th, 2021, TBDHU reported there had been 2,128 confirmed cases over the entire pandemic (Thunder Bay District Health Unit 2021). These numbers show a significant increase in the spread of the virus since the last survey in November. However, in recent weeks, the Thunder Bay area has seen a decline in cases.

For January/February, the Thunder Bay survey had a total of 66 valid respondents. Approximately 22 per cent of employers are repeat respondents from the November survey. The calculation was done using the postal code provided in the survey therefore the actual percentage may be slightly different. Unless stated otherwise, all percentages are calculated based on the number of respondents to the relevant question.



72 per cent of survey respondents are private businesses, nine per cent are public and one per cent are not-for profit (Figure 1). The proportion of the type of organization that answered the November survey are very similar to the month of September. Since the release of the first survey in April 2020, the vast majority of respondents have been businesses/organizations in the private sector.

Figure 1. Percentage of employers that identify with the following type of business.



92.4 per cent of respondents indicated that their primary business is located in Thunder Bay (Table 1). The proportion of businesses primarily located in Thunder Bay is very similar to the last survey in November. There is a decrease in the number of smaller communities represented in comparison to earlier surveys. This means that the results of the survey primarily represent what business respondents in the city of Thunder Bay are experiencing and that the smaller surrounding communities are not well represented.

Table 1. Percentage of businesses that stated the region as their primary business location

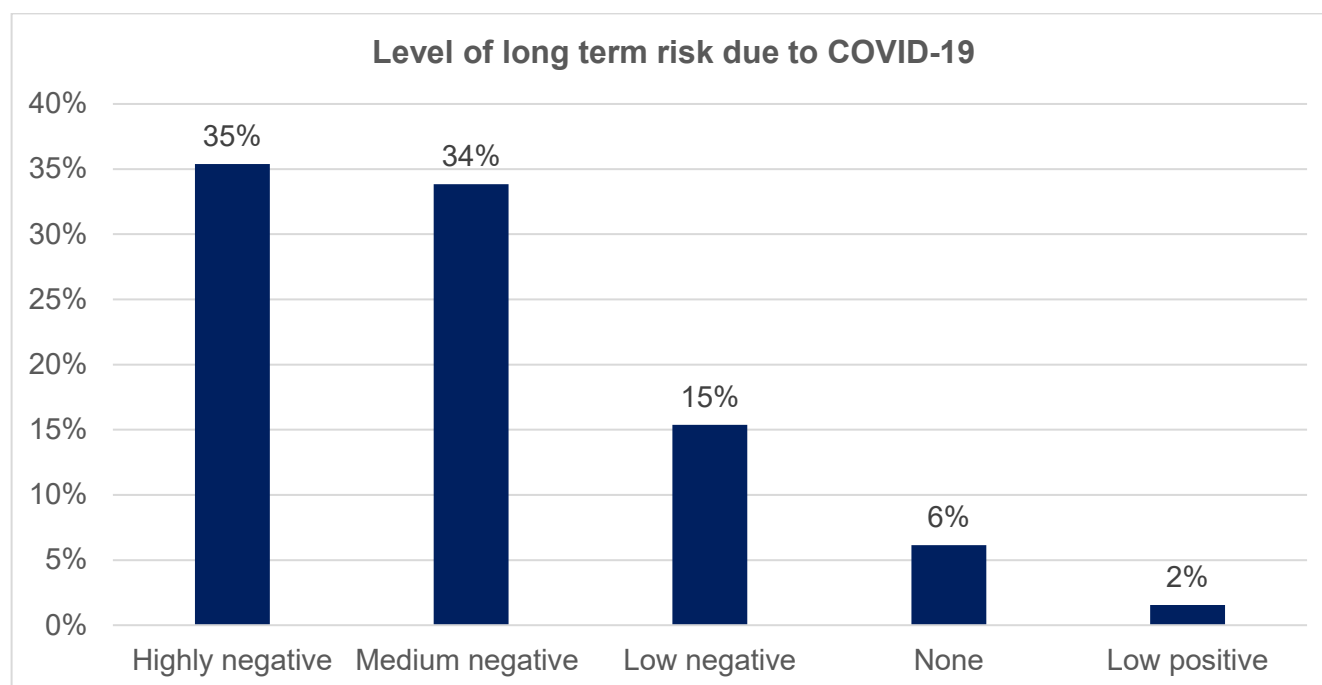
Primary Business Location	Percentage of Businesses
Thunder Bay	92.4%
Roslyn	3.0%
Terrace Bay	1.5%
Longlac	1.5%



BUSINESS CONTINUITY IMPACT

In January/February, 35 per cent of respondents categorized the strategic risk that COVID-19 poses to the long-term prospects of their business as highly negative (this could put them out of business), 34 per cent as medium negative (this is going to significantly impact their financials) and 15 per cent as low negative (this may impact their financials, but they are confident they can weather the storm) (see Figure 2). The proportion of respondents that stated that COVID-19 could put them out of business was 16 percentage points higher than in November. Since the last survey in November, the province declared another state of emergency and a stay-at-home order was put into place. As a result, all non-essential businesses were required to close their doors to the public.

Figure 2. Percentage of businesses rating the strategic risk that COVID-19 poses to the long-term prospects to their business.



Note: Highly negative = this could put us out of business, medium negative = this is going to significantly impact our financials, low negative = this may impact us financially, but we are confident we can weather the storm, low positive = demand for our products/services has changed but is still sufficient to maintain operations, medium positive = we are seeing increased demand for some of our products/services, highly positive = we have added staff and expanded production to meet demand.



The risk that COVID-19 poses to long-term business prospects by industry sector is illustrated in Figure 3. The business sectors were grouped into either goods-producing industries or service-producing industries to get a better understanding of which businesses are hit hardest by the pandemic (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2006 n.d.). Since the start of the pandemic, data has shown that the impact of COVID-19 on business has not been uniform across sectors. Generally speaking, businesses in the service industry, particularly those that are public facing, have been impacted the most by the pandemic.

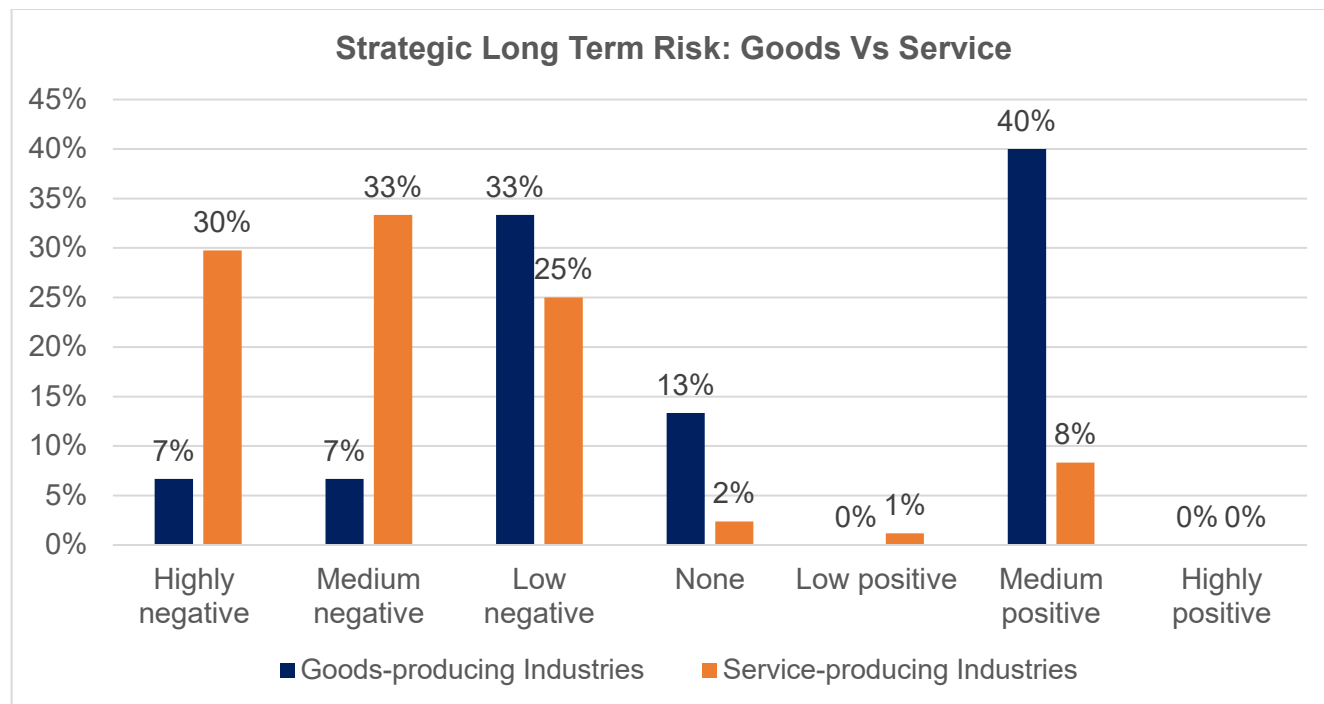
The results from the survey show that the proportion of employers in the goods-producing industries rated their strategic risk as highly negative has decreased in comparison to earlier surveys. However, in the January/February survey there was an increase in the proportion of respondents that rated their risk level as medium negative and a slight decrease that ranked their level of risk as low negative. The shift from high to medium negative in the goods-producing sector could be a result of the goods-producing sector recovering from previous bottlenecks or could be due to different businesses/organizations answering the survey.

For the service-producing sector, the proportion of employers that rated their strategic risk as highly negative increased from 15 per cent in November to 30 per cent in January/February. There was also a decrease in the percentage of employers that rated their strategic risk as low and medium positive. This is an important take away from the survey. In the last survey we were seeing the opposite trend – employers started to have a more positive outlook on their level of risk. During the most recent survey, Ontario was in a second lockdown for several weeks and business were forced to close again to the public. As a result, their level of risk that COVID poses to their business has increased.

Overall, the service-producing industries have been the hardest hit by the pandemic. According to Statistics Canada, businesses in arts, entertainment recreation, accommodation and food and retail trade sectors are the most severely impacted by the pandemic (Statistics Canada, 2020). That does not mean that the goods-producing sector has not faced any challenges, of course. For example, sectors like manufacturing of consumer durables have been facing bottlenecks in the supply chain which impacts other sectors like retail. It is important to note that the goods producing industries include many types of businesses – some of which are more sensitive to changes in the economy than others. Industries like agriculture and food processing tend to be more stable. Also, good producing industries can be sensitive to different economic factors. For example, the manufacturing industry is sensitive to changes in demand, whereas the mining and forestry industry are sensitive to changes in international prices.



Figure 3. Percentage of businesses that classified the strategic risk that COVID-19 poses to the long-term prospects of their business by industry sector.



Note: Highly negative = this could put us out of business, medium negative = this is going to significantly impact our financials, low negative = this may impact us financially, but we are confident we can weather the storm, low positive = demand for our products/services has changed but is still sufficient to maintain operations, medium positive = we are seeing increased demand for some of our products/services, highly positive = we have added staff and expanded production to meet demand.



In one of the survey questions, employers were asked “How has COVID-19 impacted your business’s/organization’s operations?”. Table 2 presents a breakdown of the percentage of employers that agreed with the provided options. Some important points to note include the increase in the percentage of employers that are experiencing reduced hours and reduced staff. This demonstrates a shift from the earlier months of the pandemic. From the beginning of the pandemic up until September, there was a steady decline in the share of employer respondents operating with reduced hours and staff. Since September, those number have steadily increased. It is the highest percentage of employers that stated having reduced hours and staff since May 2020. Also, this recent survey illustrated the highest proportion of employers that are operating their business online.

Also, it is important to note that three per cent of respondents stated that their business is closed permanently. In the previous surveys zero per cent of respondents had to close their business permanently. In addition, 30 per cent of employers stated that they had to temporarily close their business. This is a significant increase from only four per cent in November. This helps to illustrate how harshly the second wave and the subsequent province wide shutdown has impacted businesses. Business have worked hard to stay afloat and adapt to the ongoing restrictions. For example, some restaurants have put in a takeout/pick up window to make ordering food easier and safer for their customers.

Table 2. COVID-19 impacts on businesses/organizations.

COVID-19 Impacts on Businesses/Organizations	May (%)	August (%)	September (%)	November (%)	January (%)
Reduced hours	48	35	30	42	50
Reduced staff	43	29	25	36	41
Operating online	35	23	27	29	38
Delivering new services	19	28	18	22	21
We’re having trouble recalling staff	N/A	15	27	22	21
Accepting telephone orders	24	22	14	16	33
Working remotely but continuing operations	35	12	24	16	27
No impact	1	11	4	15	9
Developed new partnerships with businesses, non-profits or charities	4	6	9	11	8
Increased staff	3	5	11	9	3
Other business innovations/changes:	14	18	20	9	17
Re-tooled to manufacture in-demand supplies	4	8	6	6	8
Closed our business/organization temporarily	35	15	17	4	30
Closed our business/organization permanently	1	0	0	0	3
Increased hours	3	0	4	0	0



Employers were asked “If you have now returned to in-person operations, what have you had to go through to physically re-open?” Many respondents stated that they have followed COVID-19 protocols – frequently cleaning high touch areas, using hand sanitizer, purchasing PPE for their staff, administering screening questions and adhering to physical distancing. One respondent mentioned that they relocated their business to a larger space, and another said that they opened a completely different business. Also, many respondents noted that their business/organization was not open at the time of the survey. As mentioned, the January/February survey was released during the provincial lockdown, and as such, only essential businesses were allowed to remain open to the public.

Out of the businesses that responded to the question “What additional impacts from COVID-19 has your business/organization experienced?”, the percentage that agreed with the provided reasons are below (Table 3). The results from this question have been relatively consistent over the past months. The additional impacts that received the highest percentage of respondents have mostly remained the same. Most respondents (80 per cent in January) have increased their cleaning measure in their offices. 69 per cent of respondents are having to restrict spending because of uncertainty, 71 per cent have experienced a decrease in sales, and 53 per cent stated that their debt load has increased. This trend will likely continue until the public has been vaccinated and physical distancing protocols have been removed.

Table 3. Additional Impacts on Business/Organization

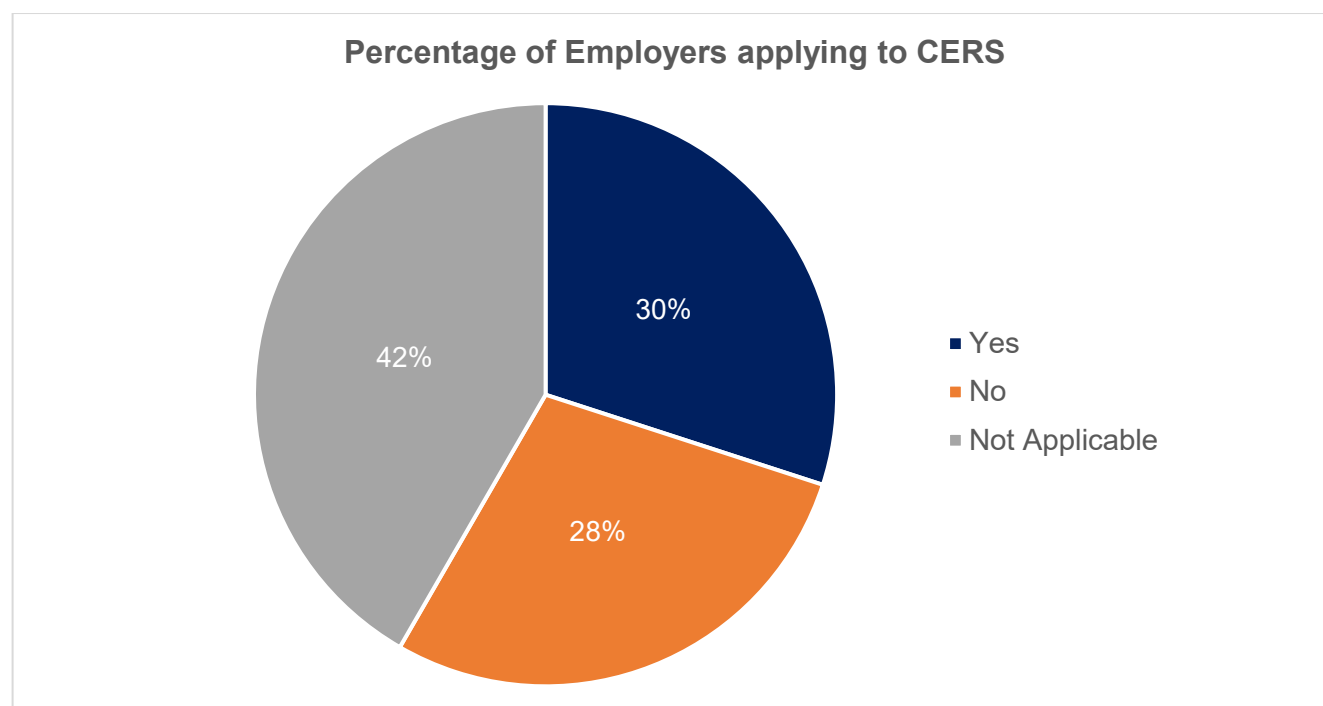
What additional impacts have you experienced (check all that apply)	May (%)	August (%)	September (%)	November (%)	January (%)
We've increased cleaning, sanitation and/or protective measures in our offices/facilities	66	79	67	75	80
We are having to restrict spending because of the uncertainty	51	57	57	56	69
We are experiencing decreases in sales (or donations if non-profit)	68	56	48	42	71
Our business equity/value has fallen	43	44	48	40	47
Our supply chain is interrupted	24	39	33	33	22
Our debt load has increased	46	41	33	31	53
Our supply chain is experiencing bottlenecks	25	30	30	27	31
We've had contracts cancelled	35	23	23	25	25
We've had to cancel fundraising events (for non-profits)	22	15	10	21	32
We've had to cancel contracts	19	15	13	21	22
We are experiencing significant increase in consumer demand for certain items	11	13	10	17	5



Our business equity/value has increased	5	8	8	17	5
We are experiencing increases in sales	5	13	11	14	10
We've signed new contracts with other businesses	6	3	5	4	12
We've signed new contracts with government	0	0	2	2	2
We have excess perishable supplies	6	5	2	0	14
Other (please specify)	6	15	8	0	10

As of September 27, 2020, Canadian businesses may be eligible for the Canada Emergency Rent Subsidy - a subsidy that assists in covering their commercial rent or property expenses (Government of Canada, 2020). There is no minimum revenue drop required to qualify for the subsidy. However, the amount received is calculated based on the amount revenue dropped. In one of the survey questions, employers were asked "Do you plan to apply for the new Canada Emergency Rent Subsidy?" (Figure 4). Based on the results shown below, 30 per cent stated they do plan on applying for CERS. 28 per cent of employers that answered the question do not plan on applying for the subsidy and 42 per cent did not qualify for the rent subsidy. Some of the conditions outline that the property cannot be a place of residence used by you or a family member, and the property cannot be primarily used to earn rental income. This restriction may limit the ability of certain businesses to apply for this rent subsidy, especially small businesses that operate out of their home.

Figure 4. Percentage of employers that plan on applying to the new Canada Emergency Rent Subsidy (CERS)

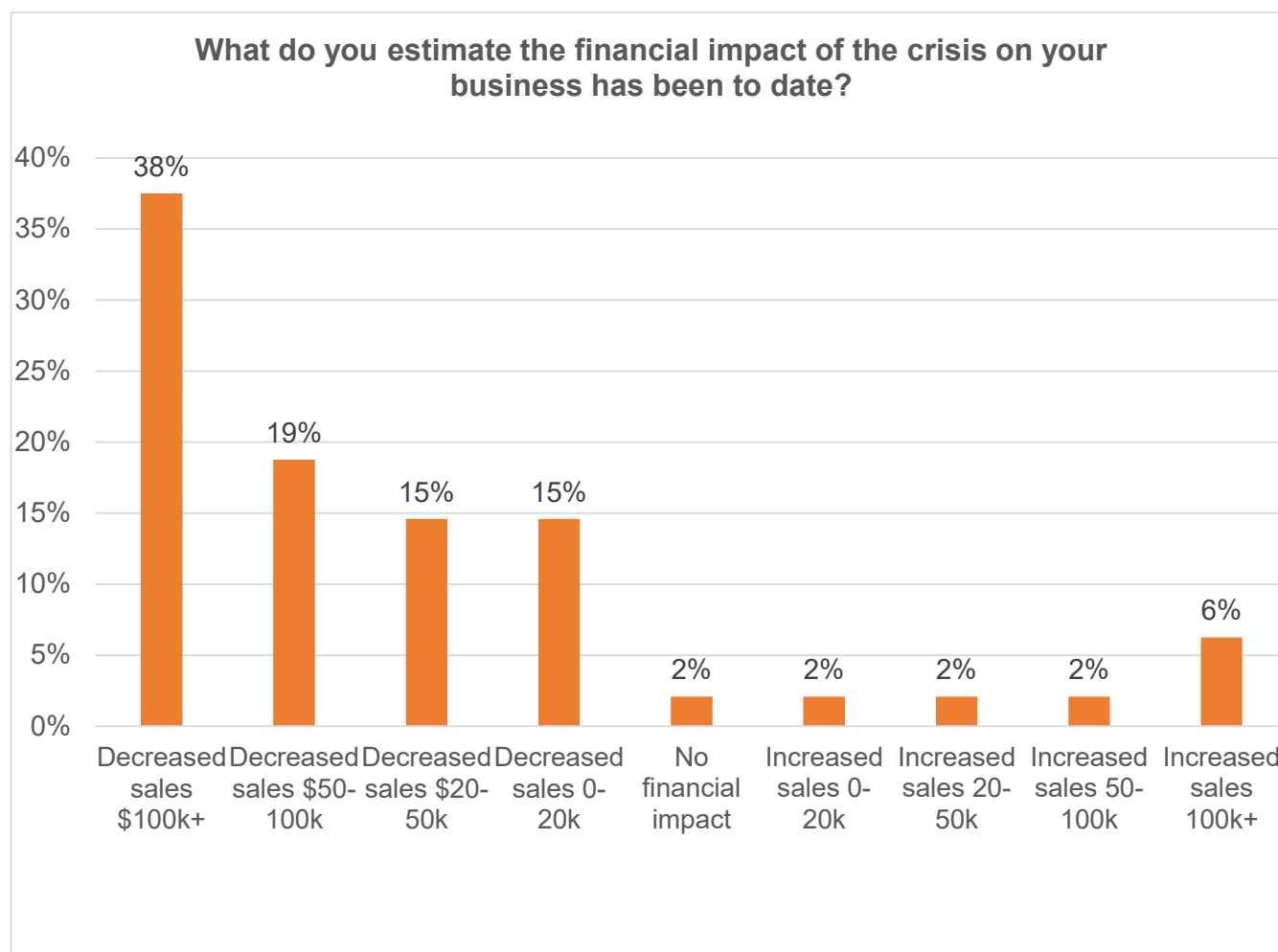




A large majority of businesses that responded to this survey are negatively financially impacted by the crisis (Figure 5). Out of the 48 employers that responded to the question, 38 per cent estimated that their sales/income decreased by more than \$100k. 19 per cent believe that their sales/income decreased by \$50-100k, 15 per cent said that their sales/income decreased by \$20-50k and 15 per cent stated that their sales/income decreased by \$0-20k. As shown by the results, the vast majority of businesses that responded have been financially impacted by COVID-19 and have incurred significant losses in sales/income since the beginning of the pandemic.

Compared to the previous results, the employers that reported a decrease in sales by more than \$100k has increased since the last survey in November. This is likely due to the province-wide lockdown that was put in affect after Christmas until mid-February.

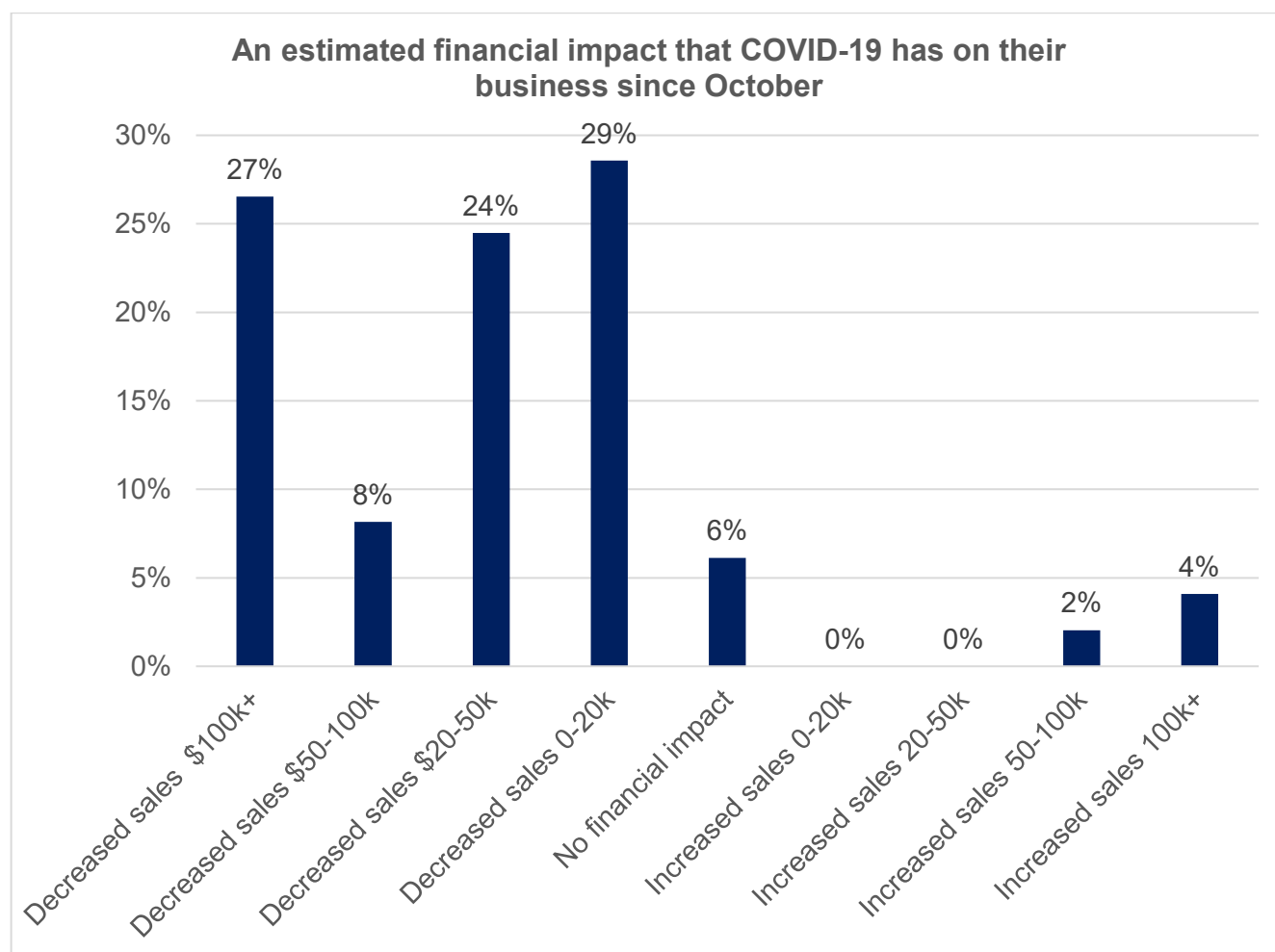
Figure 5. Percentage of employers stating an estimated financial impact that COVID-19 has on their business since the beginning of the pandemic.





With the provincial lockdown and other restrictions in mind, respondents were asked to estimate what the financial impact of the crisis on their business has been since October (Figure 6). Out of the 49 employers that responded to the question, 27 per cent estimated that their sales/income decreased by more than \$100k. Eight per cent believe that their sales/income decreased by \$50-100k, 24 per cent said that their sales/income decreased by \$20-50k and 29 per cent stated that their sales/income decreased by \$0-20k. As shown by the results, these businesses have incurred significant losses in sales/income since October. The results show that many respondents have suffered financially due to the increase in restrictions put in place over the past few months.

Figure 6. Percentage of employers stating an estimated financial impact that COVID-19 has on their business since October.



Thunder Bay District COVID-19 Business Impact SURVEY



The percentage of businesses that stated they have or are going to use the following federal and provincial programs are stated below (Table 4). The most widely used programs for January/February were the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (60 per cent), the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (53 per cent), and the Lowering Electricity Rates (51 per cent).

As the results show, the CERB has been one of the most highly used benefits since the beginning of the pandemic. The CERB closed as of September 27, 2020, but those that depend on its support can access the Canada Recovery Benefit (CRB) until September 25, 2021. The CRB was established to continue supporting Canadians who have lost their job or had a significant decrease in income due to COVID-19 and are not entitled to Employment Insurance benefits (Government of Canada, 2021).

Most of these programs are provided by the Federal Government except for the Regional Opportunities Investment Tax Credit which is funded by the Provincial Government and the Sales Tax Remittance Deferral Program which encompasses both provincial and federal programs.

In addition, employers were asked to describe their experience applying to and accessing these programs. Many respondents who answered the question indicated that programs were confusing and too complex. Some respondents indicated issues with their Canada Revenue Agency accounts, which has impacted their ability to apply for benefits. Also, many employers said they fell through the cracks or did not qualify for most of the programs.

Table 4. Percentage of businesses that stated they have or are going to access one of the following Federal and Provincial programs.

Have you or are you going to access the Federal and Provincial programs? If so which programs? Check all that apply	Yes	No	Not eligible
Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy	59.6%	6.4%	34.0%
10% Temporary Wage Subsidy	33.3%	26.7%	40.0%
Extending the Work-Sharing Program	6.8%	47.7%	45.5%
Canada Emergency Commercial Rent Assistance	48.9%	15.6%	35.6%
Changes to the Canada Summer Jobs Program	14.0%	51.2%	34.9%
Tax/Remittances Deferral Program	27.9%	53.5%	18.6%
Sales Tax Remittance and Customs Duty Payment Deferral	23.3%	53.5%	23.3%
Business Credit Availability Program	16.7%	47.6%	35.7%
Canada Emergency Business Account	50.0%	21.7%	28.3%
Insured Mortgage Purchase Program	0.0%	52.3%	47.7%
Canada Emergency Response Benefit	53.3%	22.2%	24.4%
Entrepreneurial Support Programs	11.6%	37.2%	51.2%
Regional Relief and Recovery Fund	29.5%	34.1%	36.4%
Regional Opportunities Investment Tax Credit	7.3%	46.3%	46.3%
Industrial Research Assistance Program	2.4%	48.8%	48.8%
Lowering Electricity Rates	51.2%	27.9%	20.9%
Large Employer Emergency Financing Facility Program	2.3%	20.9%	53.5%



The level of satisfaction that respondents in the Thunder Bay District have for the Federal and Provincial governments' COVID-19 programs is shown in Table 5. 52 per cent of businesses that answered this question said that they are very or somewhat satisfied with the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS), 46 per cent satisfied with the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), 40 per cent are very or somewhat satisfied with the Canada Emergency Business Account (CEBA). Even though 34 per cent of respondents are satisfied with the Canada Emergency Commercial Rent Assistance, it has the highest dissatisfaction amongst respondents. 27 per cent of employers stated they are either somewhat or very dissatisfied with the federal benefit.

Overall, the results are consistent with those from the November survey. CEWS continues to have the highest level of satisfaction across the different federal and provincial assistance programs. That being said, there was a significant decrease in the level of satisfaction for the 10 per cent Temporary Wage Subsidy. In November, 45 per cent were very or somewhat satisfied with the benefit compared to 20 per cent in January/February.

Table 5. Employer's level of satisfaction with the Federal and Provincial COVID-19 programs for employers

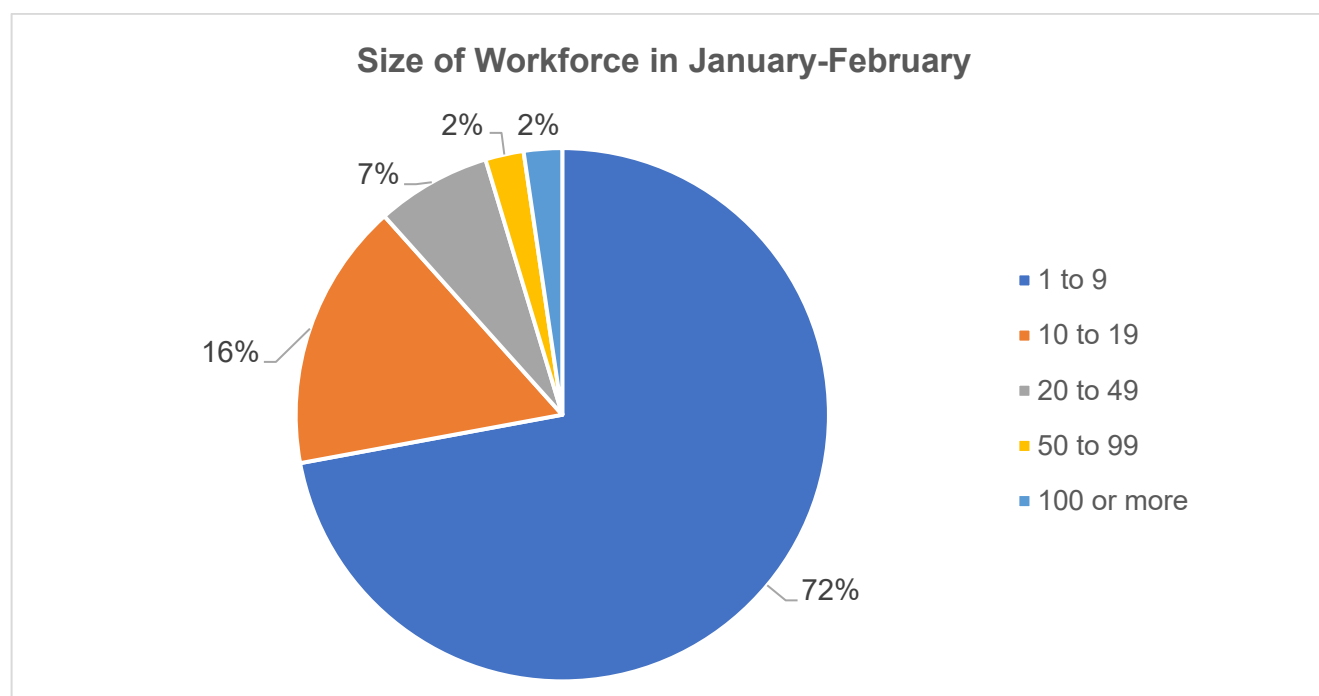
Federal COVID-19 Programs for Employers	Very Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Somewhat Unsatisfied	Very Unsatisfied
Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy	20.8%	31.3%	6.3%	4.2%
10% Temporary Wage Subsidy	11.1%	8.9%	6.7%	13.3%
Extending the Work-Sharing Program	0.0%	9.3%	4.7%	4.7%
Canada Emergency Commercial Rent Assistance	6.8%	27.3%	11.4%	15.9%
Changes to the Canada Summer Jobs Program	4.7%	7.0%	2.3%	2.3%
Tax/Remittances Deferral Programs	4.4%	31.1%	6.7%	6.7%
Sales Tax Remittance and Customs Duty Payment Deferral	2.3%	22.7%	6.8%	4.5%
Business Credit Availability Program	2.2%	15.6%	4.4%	13.3%
Canada Emergency Business Account	11.1%	28.9%	4.4%	13.3%
Insured Mortgage Purchase Program	0.0%	0.0%	4.5%	2.3%
Canada Emergency Response Benefit	15.9%	29.5%	6.8%	15.9%
Entrepreneurial Support Programs	0.0%	2.3%	7.0%	16.3%
Regional Relief and Recovery Fund	2.3%	15.9%	6.8%	15.9%
Industrial Research Assistance Program	2.3%	4.7%	7.0%	4.7%
Employer Health Tax Relief	0.0%	2.3%	4.5%	2.3%
Regional Opportunities Investment Tax Credit	6.7%	28.9%	13.3%	11.1%
Lowering electricity rates	0.0%	2.4%	2.4%	4.8%
Large Employer Emergency Financing Facility Program	0.0%	2.4%	2.4%	4.8%



BUSINESS HUMAN RESOURCE IMPACT

The percentage of businesses that stated having the following workforce sizes are found in Figure 7. In January and February, the majority were employers with a very small workforce (1-9 employees). This includes businesses that have only one employee – the proprietor. 16 per cent of businesses that answered the survey have 10-19 employees, seven per cent have 20-49 employees, two per cent have 50-99 employees and two per cent have more than 100 employees. This recent survey has a greater proportion of employers with 1-9 employees. Small business owners have consistently been the largest proportion of respondents.

Figure 7. Percentage of businesses that stated having one of the following workforce sizes.





The average number of laid off workers was calculated based on the size of the business and employee type (Table 6). Most employees that were laid off following the shutdown of non-essential businesses on March 26 were part-time and working for small to mid-sized businesses. There were very few contract workers, and no seasonal workers were laid off (not seen in table). A possible explanation is that most of the employers who answered the survey do not hire many (or any) seasonal and/or contract workers, or businesses did not hire any seasonal and/or contract workers because of COVID-19.

Table 6. Average number of employees laid off by employee type.

Size of your workforce	Average number of full-time employees	Average number of part-time employees	Average number of seasonal workers
1 to 9	3.6	9.4	1.5
10 to 19	6.7	18.2	0
20 to 49	3	0	0
50-99	0	0	0
100 or more	0	0	0

Many respondents implemented measures to support/protect their employees during the COVID-19 crisis. The percentage of employers that stated implementing one or more measures to support/protect their employees during this crisis is found in Table 7. Based on the results from this question, 83 per cent of employers implemented physical distancing measures in their business. The results show a steady increase in the percentage of respondents that are implementing these measures over the course of the crisis. Other results include, 71 per cent of employers are informing employees of the government assistance programs available to them. Also, in January/February, the results show an increase in the proportion of employers that closed their business/organization temporarily and are not paying employees during closure (29 per cent). As well as an increase in the proportion of employers that have asked employees to use vacation, sick or personal days during the crisis and postponing layoffs (22 per cent). These results reflect the negative impact that the lockdown has had on local businesses more generally. Employers have been working hard to stay afloat and trying their best to make it through this pandemic.



Table 7. Percentage of employers that implemented the following measures to support/protect employees during the COVID-19 crisis.

Measures Implemented by employers	May (%)	August (%)	September (%)	November (%)	January (%)
We've implemented physical distancing measures in our business	68	76	79	84	83
We've educated our employees as to the symptoms and risks associated with the virus, as well as prevention measures	70	74	29	74	49
We've informed employees of the government assistance programs	51	55	81	48	71
We've required employees to work from home	33	33	44	32	27
We've staggered work hours for employees	33	26	17	40	7
We've hired or made employees aware of mental health and well-being resources	25	26	29	40	27
We continue to pay wages to employees that are off work for quarantine or illness.	14	24	10	21	22
We've closed our business/organization temporarily and not paying employees during closure	24	12	29	16	29
We are asking employees to use vacation, sick or personal days during the crisis, and deferring layoffs	5	5	13	8	22
Other (please specify)	13	24	38	16	54



WHAT DO YOU THINK THE GOVERNMENT CAN DO TO ASSIST YOU RIGHT NOW?

For the open-ended question “What do you think the government can do to assist you right now?”, the most common answers at the local level were ending the lockdown in Thunder Bay, allow small businesses to reopen, and reducing taxes. Employers would like to see a return to the regional approach. The province returned to the regional framework on the last day of this survey (February 16th), although as mentioned earlier, further changes have been made by the province.

At the provincial level, respondents stated similar answers to the local level. Employers would like more provincial assistance, as well as an end to the province wide lockdown and a return to the regional response framework. Some respondents mentioned the vaccine rollout – they would like to see more people vaccinated. As of March 15th, the province opened the new online appointment portal and will be starting with individuals aged 80 and older (Government of Ontario 2021c).

At the federal level, respondents stated that the government should assist businesses by continuing to provide programs and support. Several employers stated that they would like the assistance programs to be extended as they require continued financial support. Employers also mentioned that they would like to see loan forgiveness and interest deferral for the financial assistance they have received. Also, some respondents noted that they want the border to remain closed. The US-Canada border has been closed for the past year and the closure will be extended once again on March 21. There is currently no plan in place to re-open the border (CBC 2021a).



Conclusion

Overall, most businesses have been forced to close their doors to the public for the second province-wide lockdown while this survey was out in the field. Employers have worked hard to adapt to this new reality by making changes to their business in order to continue operating while closed to the public. For instance, employers have adapted their business to provide new goods and/or services, or continue delivering the same services in new ways, such as operating online or installing a takeout window. However, due to closure of non-essential businesses, it is almost impossible for businesses to operate at full capacity. As a result, these changes are reflected in the high percentage of respondents that view, there is a high percentage of employers that view their level of long-term risk as highly negative and have either already, or are at risk of, closing their business.

Business have relied on the continued support from the provincial and federal governments and other organizations. The employers who responded to this survey have indicated that governments should allow small businesses to reopen, provide further financial assistance and tax relief, and extend the various programs currently offered in order to recover from this crisis. The survey respondents also mentioned that they would like to see the vaccine go out to more people. The vaccine rollout will be a key component for enabling businesses to re-open to the public at full capacity. Most health care workers in Ontario have received at least 1 dose of a COVID-19 vaccine. As of March 15th, Northern Ontario has started to get vaccine to the older population and First Nation members in urban and remote areas (CBC 2021b). Hopefully with the continued rollout of vaccine and the warmer weather ahead, businesses will be able to re-open and people will be able to safely get together once again.



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