Fear of travelling: Canadians need to put travel risk into perspective

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The pandemic hit nearly two years ago, and since then, Canadians' fear of travel has been a constant theme. Tuning into daily COVID-19 briefings likely contributed to this heightened sense of fear.

In March 2020, the [federal government](#) [issued a blanket travel warning, which was only lifted](#) on Oct. 22, 2021. As recently as May 2021, [Ontario Premier Doug Ford blamed travel and borders](#) for a rise in cases when evidence pointed to there being [other causes](#) for case increases like [lack of proper PPE](#), [community spread](#), [overcrowded housing and poverty](#).

The "[problem frame](#)" here is how certain messages shared during the pandemic have helped [maintain a fear of travel over time](#).

As researchers whose work looks at travel and tourism, we were curious about the impact of COVID-19 briefings and the way media reported them on the industry. We think it's time to put fear into perspective for the traveler.

Discourses of blame and shame

An [analysis](#)—published as part of the [Traveling Towards Tomorrow Together: Travel and Tourism Research Association Canada conference](#)—of Canadian online news, noted how the media has perpetuated a fear of travel through narratives that emphasize safety, mistrust and guilt.

Reading, listening and watching the news has caused anxiety in many citizens who deem tourism activities [too risky during the pandemic](#).

Some news outlets reported on [inconsistent health-related messaging](#) and [the dangers of travel](#), while others reported on an industry-sponsored study that showed there was little [flying risk](#) if preventative measures were in place. This caused confusion.

These varying messages and subsequent reporting aren't a total surprise. Especially considering how at the start of the pandemic, we faced an unknown virus, with minimal knowledge. Tests, treatments and

prevention strategies have evolved, but different phases of the pandemic—and health-related messaging and media coverage—highlight how risk changed and evolved over time.

Regardless, media coverage of [changing government travel restrictions](link) and differing [health and safety guidelines](link)—like masking—exacerbated a [discourse of mistrust](link) in [media and in government officials](link).

How Canadians feel about travel

An [April 2021 survey](link) found that 82 percent of Canadians perceived taking a vacation as a large or moderate risk.

Feelings of guilt and [travel shaming](link) influenced how Canadians [felt about traveling](link)—many likely [thought they will be judged](link) for putting others at risk.

Politicians [shamed Canadians who chose to travel](link) whether it was early in the pandemic (before any [travel restrictions](link) were in place), or later when tourism-related businesses advertised cheap domestic flights and trips.

When the government [banned flights](link) to "sun destinations" in January 2021, many Canadians took it to heart and stayed home. Just four months later, messaging from the travel and tourism sector surfaced about it being up to Canadians to [save summer tourism](link).

After the Canadian government [lifted global travel restrictions](link) on non-essential travel with [no press release](link), the media reported on the problem frame.

Stories highlighted how "mindful" Canadians should be when [traveling south](link) and some shared messages from epidemiologists that [we should keep our foot on the brake of travel](link) to keep incident rates low, while

others focused on Canadians return to travel [helping struggling Caribbean islands](#).

The [Canadian Travel and Tourism Roundtable](#)—a group of Canadian tourism and travel businesses hoping to "reopen the economy"—recently called on the government to remove "non-science-based obstacles to international travel, such as expensive pre-departure PCR tests for fully vaccinated travelers, that disproportionately impact average Canadian families."

Perceived risk

There are nuances to how [different cultures](#) perceive travel risk. Canadians normally [find travel less risky than Americans and Australians](#). However, a recent study about post-pandemic travel showed that Canadians were [more cautious](#) to travel than their American or European counterparts.

A columnist in the *Toronto Sun*, called Canadians out for being "[unjustifiably afraid](#)" of travel. Traveling and flying always present a risk, but that [risk is low](#) if mitigation measures and infection prevention are observed.

It's important to note however, that after Alberta lifted its restrictions [they faced a devastating surge in cases](#).

Canadians are among the most hesitant when considering an international leisure trip, according to a [survey conducted by TCI Research](#). The majority of them (81 percent) have also paid close attention to media during the pandemic says [an Ipsos survey](#)—actively seeking risk information which influences their [perception and knowledge](#).

Managing travel risk and media messages

Canadians perceive travel risk subjectively and reduce risk by remaining cautious and choosing not to travel.

A resident sentiment study by Destination Canada shows that in recent months, feelings of safety have decreased or remained unchanged across five Canadian provinces.

But now that the vast majority of Canadians are vaccinated, and many tourism businesses and destinations have implemented careful safety protocols for travelers, those feelings of safety should change.

It is time for Canadians to mitigate travel risks by adopting objective risk management strategies.

The risk of getting COVID-19 will not be zero, it will likely never be zero. People must continue to assess risk based on science, wear masks in public and pay attention in crowded areas. When vaccinated, Canadians should feel more comfortable traveling because travel professionals are working to keep us safe, there is life after vaccination.

Despite it being important to respect countries' travel advisories to prevent the spread of COVID-19, avoiding leisure travel for the past 18 months has led to a significant impact on our mental well-being and a loss of jobs across the tourism industry.

Now that restrictions are lifting and leisure travel is resuming, we need to be reminded that travel has positive effects on our health and wellness.

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