

# Payphone Use Among Low-Income Canadians

A report prepared by  
L'Union des consommateurs  
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# 1. Methodology

This survey was designed in order to research the use of and perceptions towards payphones by low-income persons. Through BCPIAC, CAC, PIAC and Union des consommateurs' networks and member groups, we identified community organizations and locations where it was expected to find a high proportion of low-income persons, including organizations that provide basic needs (ie. food banks, clothing, advocacy, etc.), seniors' organizations, disability organizations, and rural organizations. This methodological choice purposively weighted the sample towards lower income households. A list of all places surveyed is provided in Appendix A.

Many of these organizations asked their employees or volunteers to survey members and users of their services. In Toronto and Vancouver, we hired people to conduct the surveys. In these cases, the person made an appointment in advance to arrange to conduct the surveys when it was likely that a large number of members and users would be at the location. The persons conducting the survey filled out individual survey forms. The survey (Appendix B) was prepared in English and translated to French. The people conducting the surveys were given an instruction sheet, an introductory script and a sheet of additional information to be referred to if the persons surveyed asked them questions. These documents are provided in Appendix C.

The survey was conducted between February 17th and February 28th. The survey was administered randomly to people present at the participating community organizations. Each survey took approximately 5-10 minutes to complete.

The entire sample of respondents were asked four questions at the start of the survey: 1) ownership of a land line, 2) ownership of a cellular phone, 3) estimated use of payphones, and 4) perceived importance of pay phone calls received from others. The entire sample was also asked about their socio-demographic characteristics. Only those who reported using payphones were asked the remaining questions. A subset of the respondents was asked two additional questions : people who had no phone, either land line or cellular, were asked where they place phone calls and where they receive phone calls.

## 2. Socio-demographic characteristics

Number of people surveyed 516

List of sub-groups into which the data has been broken down

***Breakdown according to whether or not the respondents have a phone***

See section 3 below

***Breakdown according to gender***

	<i>n</i>	
Number of men	301	<b>58%</b>
Number of women	215	<b>42%</b>

***Urban/rural breakdown***

	<i>n</i>	
Number of people from a large urban center (500,000 people or more)	362	<b>70%</b>
Number of people from smaller communities	154	<b>30%</b>

***Breakdown by province***

	<i>n</i>	
Alberta	20	<b>4%</b>
British Columbia	71	<b>14%</b>
Nova Scotia	20	<b>4%</b>
Ontario	160	<b>31%</b>
Quebec	245	<b>47%</b>

***Breakdown by age group***

	<i>n</i>	
Less than 18	13	<b>2.5%</b>
18-24	37	<b>7%</b>
25-29	50	<b>10%</b>
30-34	45	<b>9%</b>
35-44	126	<b>24%</b>
45-54	99	<b>19%</b>
55-64	60	<b>11.5%</b>
65 and over	19	<b>4%</b>
NR	67	<b>13%</b>

### ***Breakdown following income***

	<i>n</i>	
Less than 10,000\$	216	<b>42%</b>
10,000\$ to 19,999\$	97	<b>19%</b>
20,000\$ to 29,999\$	60	<b>12%</b>
30,000\$ to 39,999\$	16	<b>3%</b>
Over 40,000\$	20	<b>4%</b>
NR	107	<b>21%</b>

### ***Breakdown following housing arrangements***

	<i>n</i>	
Living alone	247	<b>48%</b>
Couple with children	52	<b>10%</b>
Couple without children	35	<b>7%</b>
One adult with children	47	<b>9%</b>
Two or more unrelated persons	34	<b>7%</b>
Living with parents	7	<b>1%</b>
Other	12	<b>2%</b>
NR	82	<b>16%</b>

## **3. Access to telephone service**

Among the people surveyed, a large group (a quarter of the sample) had no phone service whatsoever.

	<i>n</i>	
<b>Number of people without any phone service</b>	129	<b>25%</b>
<b>Number of people with only land line</b>	245	<b>47.5%</b>
<b>Number of people with only cell phone</b>	59	<b>11.5%</b>
<b>Number of people with land line and cell phone</b>	83	<b>16%</b>

Sub-group analysis shows that the percentage of people without a land line is larger in cities and smaller in rural areas.

## 4. Frequency of payphone use

People with low-incomes rely heavily on payphones. The number of low-income people who use payphones daily is twenty times more than reported by the nation-wide telephone survey of Canadians completed by Ekos (the Ekos Survey)<sup>1</sup>. Those who use payphones at least once a week constitute a group that is seven times larger than in the general population at large.

		Ekos Survey
<b>Never</b>	<b>7%</b>	30%
<b>Less than once a year</b>	<b>5%</b>	20%
<b>A few times a year</b>	<b>13%</b>	32%
<b>At least once a month</b>	<b>16%</b>	11%
<b>At least once a week</b>	<b>37%</b>	5%
<b>Every day</b>	<b>22%</b>	1%

Percentages in most sub-groups follow the total percentages. However, as is the case in the Ekos Survey, younger users tend to use payphones more. Data for users 29 years old and under is as follow:

<b>Never</b>	<b>1%</b>
<b>Less than once a year</b>	<b>4%</b>
<b>A few times a year</b>	<b>11%</b>
<b>At least once a month</b>	<b>15%</b>
<b>At least once a week</b>	<b>38%</b>
<b>Every day</b>	<b>31%</b>

Other than this, sub-group analysis confirms the hypothesis that people who don't own a phone rely even more heavily on payphones.

<b>Never</b>	<b>5%</b>
<b>Less than once a year</b>	<b>2%</b>
<b>A few times a year</b>	<b>5%</b>
<b>At least once a month</b>	<b>12%</b>
<b>At least once a week</b>	<b>36%</b>
<b>Every day</b>	<b>40%</b>

The heavy reliance on payphones by this sub-group of people without land line or cell phone is confirmed by the response to the question: When you need to make a phone call, where do you go?

<b>Use payphone</b>	<b>82%</b>
<b>Use phone in community centre</b>	<b>52%</b>
<b>Friend, family, neighbour</b>	<b>34%</b>
<b>Other</b>	<b>10%</b>

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<sup>1</sup> Ekos Research Associates Inc., Payphone Use in Canada - Final Report, February 2003.

We also asked people without phones how they received phone calls from others. Considering that a limited number of payphones can receive phone calls (among them TTY equipped phones), percentages of people who use payphones in such a way are necessarily small.

<b>Use payphone</b>	<b>17%</b>
<b>Voicemail</b>	<b>18%</b>
<b>Pager</b>	<b>5%</b>
<b>Friend, family, neighbour</b>	<b>26%</b>
<b>Other</b>	<b>15%</b>
<b>Does not receive phone calls</b>	<b>32%</b>

## 5. Nature of calls

### *a) Reasons for use*

Low-income people use payphones for the following reasons:

<b>Important personal calls (e.g., spouse, children)</b>	<b>69%</b>
<b>Convenience calls (e.g., to get directions, call a taxi)</b>	<b>58%</b>
<b>Important services (social services, school, doctor, lawyer)</b>	<b>55%</b>
<b>Emergency</b>	<b>50%</b>
<b>Social calls (just to chat)</b>	<b>45%</b>
<b>Employment-related (job hunting, work calls)</b>	<b>38%</b>
<b>Other</b>	<b>7%</b>

An additional question was asked in the low-income survey to evaluate the motivation behind the respondents' use of payphones. People were asked which of the following elements (possibly more than one) motivated them to use payphones in the last year. An overwhelming majority (71%) say that they use payphones because they have no other option.

<b>No other option</b>	<b>71%</b>
<b>Most convenient at the time</b>	<b>46%</b>
<b>Privacy</b>	<b>18%</b>
<b>Other</b>	<b>4%</b>

There are a number of differences in the nature of payphone use according to age and whether or not respondents have phone service.

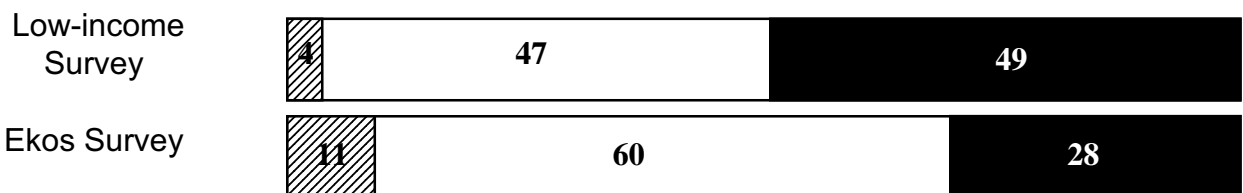
- People without any phone whatsoever are much more likely to have made calls for important services (72%) and work-related, possibly job hunting, calls (51%).
- Those 29 or under are more likely to have made calls for important services (70%).
- Those in the 30-34 age group are more likely than average to have made both convenience calls (70%) and work-related calls (50%).

- Those in 55 or over are less likely to have made emergency phone calls (35% in the case of the 55-64 age group and 29% in the 65 and over age group).
- Those in the 65 and over age group are significantly less likely to have used payphones for all reasons except social calls which they cite more often than average (59%).

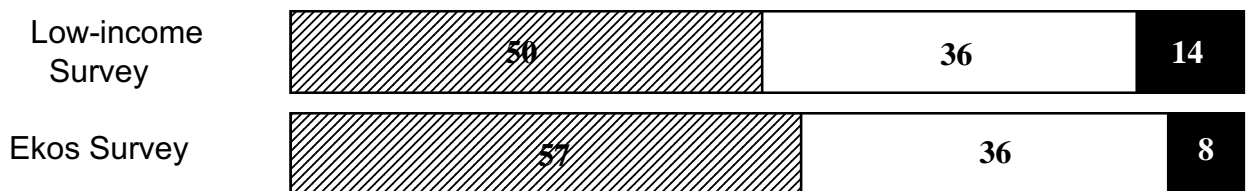
## b) Types of use

People with low-incomes use payphone services in percentages that are similar to those found in the Ekos Survey. There are two differences: their use of payphones for local calls is more likely to be frequent and they tend to call directory assistance more.

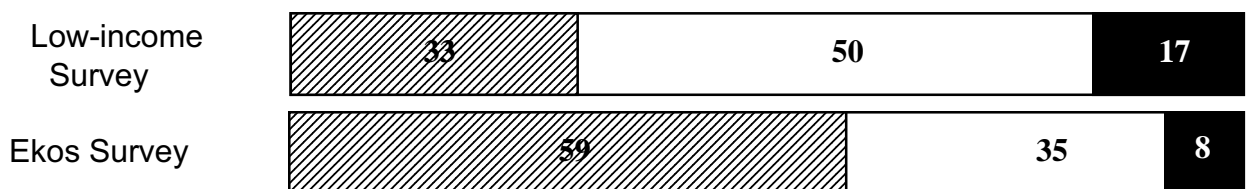
### Local calls



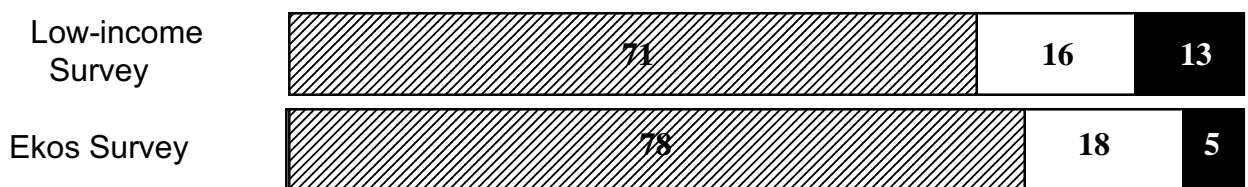
### Long distance calls



### Directory assistance



### To receive calls



Never
  Sometimes
  Frequently



Sub-group analysis shows that in rural areas people's evaluation of their use of payphones is lower than city dwellers' evaluation. People in rural areas use payphones less both to make local calls (40%) and calls to directory assistance (10%). Moreover, although the percentage of frequent users of long distance in payphones is the same, more people in rural areas claim that they never make long distance calls from a payphone (59%).

### ***c) Methods of payment***

Coins are the most popular method of payment for people with low-incomes. Low-income people are slightly more likely to use coins and prepaid cards than is the general population, but are less likely to use calling cards. Not surprisingly, a very small percentage of people with low-incomes use credit cards.

		Ekos Survey
<b>Coins</b>	<b>92%</b>	84%
<b>Prepaid cards</b>	<b>28%</b>	23%
<b>Collect calls</b>	<b>22%</b>	29%
<b>Calling cards</b>	<b>20%</b>	42%
<b>Third party billing</b>	<b>9%</b>	8%
<b>Credit cards</b>	<b>3%</b>	11%

Of the many possible methods of payment a person might use, respondents were asked to single out the one that they use the most often. Again, coins and prepaid cards are used somewhat more by this group than by the population in general.

		Ekos Survey
<b>Coins</b>	<b>75%</b>	65%
<b>Prepaid cards</b>	<b>11%</b>	6%
<b>Calling cards</b>	<b>8%</b>	19%
<b>Collect calls</b>	<b>3%</b>	5%
<b>Credit cards</b>	<b>2%</b>	2%
<b>Third party billing</b>	<b>1%</b>	1%

## 6. Importance of payphone calls

All respondents were asked if it was important for them that others can use payphones to reach them. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of phone calls that they receive from someone else using a payphone on a scale ranging from 1 to 7. 1 and 2 are grouped as “Not important”, 3, 4 and 5 as “Somewhat important” and 6 and 7 as “Very important”.

		Ekos Survey
<b>Not important</b>	<b>15%</b>	21%
<b>Somewhat important</b>	<b>29%</b>	30%
<b>Very important</b>	<b>52%</b>	47%
<b>NR</b>	<b>4%</b>	2%

## 7. Service

### *a) Availability of payphones*

Two thirds of respondents feel that it is very important that payphones are available in the area where they live.

<b>Not important</b>	<b>4%</b>
<b>Somewhat important</b>	<b>22%</b>
<b>Very important</b>	<b>67%</b>
<b>NR</b>	<b>7%</b>

Percentages in all sub-groups follow these percentages closely.

Availability of payphone service was rated as good or excellent by a large number of respondents (61%). However, a significant number of respondents rated the availability as only fair or poor (38%).

<b>Excellent</b>	<b>25%</b>
<b>Good</b>	<b>37%</b>
<b>Fair</b>	<b>26%</b>
<b>Poor</b>	<b>12%</b>

Percentages in most sub-groups follow the total averages. However, in the case of phoneless people, the percentage of users rating the availability of payphones as fair or poor is lower than average but still significant at 31%. The fact that they give a somewhat better score on the issue of payphone availability might be explained by the fact that they have identified payphones that they use regularly.

## ***b) Locations where payphones are used***

The survey shows that there are four types of places where nearly or more than 50% of people with low income use payphones. These are street phones, phones in shopping centres, phones in bus/train/subway stations, and phones in hospitals and clinics.

<b>Shopping centres</b>	<b>60%</b>
<b>Street</b>	<b>56%</b>
<b>Train/bus/subway stations</b>	<b>56%</b>
<b>Hospitals or clinics</b>	<b>47%</b>
<b>Gas stations</b>	<b>41%</b>
<b>Schools</b>	<b>31%</b>
<b>Restaurants</b>	<b>21%</b>
<b>Other</b>	<b>13%</b>

Sub-group analysis shows differences between urban and rural users. Urban users identified, in decreasing order of use, street, shopping centres, train/bus/subway stations, hospitals or clinics, gas stations, schools, restaurants and other places. Rural users, in contrast, mostly use phones in shopping centres, followed head-to-head by phones in hospitals or clinics and gas stations, then in decreasing order, schools, train/bus stations, restaurants, other places and street phones.

## ***c) Reliability of payphone service***

Some users have been frustrated when wanting to use a payphone. One person out of five reported having frequently found payphones out of work.

<b>Frequently</b>	<b>21%</b>
<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>64%</b>
<b>Never</b>	<b>15%</b>

## 8. Conclusions

### ***1. A large proportion of very poor people have no phone of their own.***

The fact that 25% of the people surveyed had no phone whatsoever sheds a particular light on the issue of access to phone services. This shows that managing without a phone is a fact of life for many poor Canadians.

### ***2. People with a low income and younger people are frequent users of payphones.***

Almost all respondents to this survey said they use payphones and three out of five said they use them frequently (daily or weekly). Over two-thirds of respondents 30 years and under are frequent users.

### ***3. Coins still are the most convenient way of ensuring service***

The majority of payphone users use coins to pay for calls. This method is by far the most popular way of paying for calls.

### ***4. Availability of payphones is important***

Two-thirds of the people surveyed responded that it is very important for payphones to be available in the area where they live.

## **Appendix A List of places surveyed**

Edmonton Food Bank

First United Church Food Bank, Vancouver  
Advocacy Access, BC Coalition of People with Disabilities, Vancouver  
Surrey Food Bank, Vancouver  
411 Senior's Drop-in Centre, Vancouver  
Rural Women's Project, Sointula

Metro Food Bank Society, Halifax

Salvation Army Family Services Food Bank, Sault St. Marie  
People with Aids Foundation Food Bank, Toronto  
Fort York Food Bank, Toronto  
Parkdale Activity Recreation Centre Food Bank, Toronto  
Oasis Dufferin Community Centre Food Bank, Toronto  
High Park Baptist Church Food Bank, Toronto  
Centre for Active Resources Food Bank, Toronto

ACEF de Lanaudière, Joliette  
ACEF du Grand-Portage, Rivière-du-Loup  
Banque alimentaire de Rivière-du-Loup  
ACEF de la Rive-Sud-de-Québec, Lévis  
Banque alimentaire Le Grenier, Lévis  
Les Quatre-vents, organisme de soutien en santé mentale, Lévis  
ACEF de l'Estrie, Sherbrooke  
Soupe populaire La Chaudronnée, Sherbrooke  
Centre coopératif des locaux communautaires de Sherbrooke, Sherbrooke  
ACEF de Granby,  
Banque alimentaire de Granby  
ACEF de l'Abitibi-Témiscamingue, Rouyn  
Banque alimentaire Croc-ensemble, Trois-Pistoles  
Banque alimentaire de la Maisonnée, Montréal  
Banque alimentaire du comité social Centre-Sud, Montréal  
Comptoir alimentaire de Villeray, Montréal  
Accueil Bonneau, refuge pour sans-abris, Montréal  
La Maison du père, refuge pour sans-abris, Montréal

## Appendix B Questionnaire

Name of place surveyed

City or town

1. Do you have a home phone?

Base 516

Yes 328 64%

No 188 36%

2. Do you have a wireless (cell) phone?

Base 516

Yes 138 27%

No 378 73%

IF YES TO Q1 or Q2, SKIP Q3 – Q4:

3. When you need to make a phone call, where do you go? (tick all that apply)

Base 129

Pay phone 106 82%

Free community phone 67 52%

Neighbour or friend's phone 44 34%

Other – specify 13 10%

4. How do you receive phone calls from others?

Base 129

Voicemail service 23 18%

Pager 6 5%

Friend's phone 34 26%

Payphone that allows incoming calls 22 17%

Other – specify 19 15%

Don't generally receive calls from others 41 32%

5. How often do you use public payphones to make telephone calls?

Base 514

Would you say:

Every day 111 22%

At least once a week 187 36%

At least once a month 84 16%

A few times a year 69 13%

Less than once a year 24 5%

Never 38 7%

6. How important is it that others can use payphones to call you?

Base 516

(Please respond using the following 7-point scale where 1 means not at all important, 7 means extremely important and the mid-point 4 means somewhat important.)

1. Not at all important	65	13%
2. -	18	3%
3. -	15	3%
4. Somewhat important	112	22%
5. -	20	4%
6. -	24	5%
7. Extremely important	244	47%
NR	13	3%

IF YOU HAVE ANSWERED "NEVER" TO QUESTION 5, PLEASE STOP HERE

7. In which of the following locations do you use payphones:

Base 478

(tick all that apply)

On the street	270	56%
In train or bus stations or in public transit facilities	266	56%
In shopping centres	289	60%
At gas stations or rest areas	194	41%
In Hospitals, clinics	225	47%
At School	146	31%
At Restaurant or hotels	101	21%
Other	61	13%

8. What types of calls have you made from a payphone in the past year?

Base 478

(tick all that apply)

Emergency	241	50%
employment-related (job hunting, work calls, etc.)	182	38%
important services (social services, school, doctor, lawyer, etc.)	264	55%
important personal calls (e.g., spouse, children)	328	69%
social calls (just to chat, keep in touch with family and friends, or decrease isolation)	214	45%
convenience calls (e.g., to get directions, call a taxi...)	276	58%
other – specify	35	7%

9. How often do you use a payphone for the following purposes?

Base 477

(Answer Frequently, Sometimes, or Never)

Local calls

Frequently	232	49%
Sometimes	223	47%
Never	20	4%

Base 427

LD calls

Frequently	58	14%
Sometimes	155	36%
Never	212	50%

Base 443

calls to directory assistance

Frequently	76	17%
Sometimes	221	50%
Never	145	33%

Base 435

to receive calls from other people

Frequently	56	13%
Sometimes	69	16%
Never	309	71%

10. When you use a payphone, it's because:

Base 478

(tick all that apply)

you have no other option	341	71%
you have other options, but you want privacy	84	18%
you have other options, but it's the most convenient way to call at that time	218	46%
other – specify	21	4%

11. Which of the following methods of payment have you used when making payphone calls during the last year?

Base 478

(Tick more than one, if applicable)

Coins	439	92%
Pre-paid card	136	28%
Credit card	13	3%
Calling card	95	20%
Collect call	106	22%
Third party billing	41	9%



12. And which of these methods of payment do you use most often?

Base 475

Coins	356	75%
Pre-paid card	52	11%
Credit card	10	2%
Calling card	38	8%
Collect call	14	3%
Third party billing	5	1%

13. Would you object if payphones no longer accepted coins?

Base 466

Yes 424 91%

No 42 9%

14. Some phone companies would like to raise payphone rates to 50¢. Would this make a difference to your use of payphones?

Base 475

I would use pay phones less 272 57%

I wouldn't change my habits 183 39%

I would use pay phones more 20 4%

15. How often, if ever, have you tried to use a payphone and found that it is not working?

Base 458

Would that be. . .

Frequently 93 20%

Sometimes 295 64%

Never 70 15%

16. How important is it to you that payphones are available in the area you live?

Base 478

(Please respond using the following 7-point scale where 1 means not at all important, 7 means extremely important and the mid-point 4 means somewhat important.)

1. Not at all important 15 3%

2. - 6 1%

3. - 6 1%

4. Somewhat important 77 16%

5. - 20 4%

6. - 42 9%

7. Extremely important 278 58%

NR 34 7%

17. How would you rate the availability of payphone service (number and location of payphones) where you live?

Base 478

Excellent 121 25%

Good 175 37%

Fair 125 26%

Poor 57 12%

18. Would you say that the availability of payphones is better, worse or about the same as it was ten years ago?

Base 433

Better 127 29%

Same 122 28%

Worse 116 27%

Poor 68 16%

19. In which of the following age group are you?

Less than 18 years old

18-24 years old

25-29 years old

30-34 years old

35-44 years old

45-54 years old

55-64 years old

65 years old or more

Does not answer

20. Which of the following describes your household status?

One person, living alone

A married/common law couple with children

A married/common law couple without children

One adult with children

Two or more unrelated persons

Living with parents

Other

Does not answer

21. What is your annual household income from all sources before taxes?

Less than \$10,000

\$10,000 to \$19,999

\$20,000 to \$29,999

\$30,000 to \$39,999

\$40,000 or over

Does not answer

Please take down the gender of the person.

Male Female

## Appendix C Instruction sheet, introductory script and sheet of additional information

### Instructions to the people who administer the Pay Phone Survey

1. Before starting, read through the questionnaire yourself and make sure that you understand all the questions. For information, please call Jean Sébastien (514) 521-6820, Pippa Lawson (613) 562-4002 or Pat MacDonald (604) 687-3063.
2. Interpretation of choice of answers to some question: **3 and 4** Family, neighbour or friend's phone can be either a home phone, a business phone or an individual's cell phone; **20** couples can be same sex or opposite sex.
3. Identify on the proper space on the questionnaire (on top of the first page) the locations at which you are administering the survey "Food Bank", "Shelter for the homeless", "Resource centre for drug users", etc. as appropriate.
4. Do not allow people to fill the form in themselves.
5. Read the general presentation for survey on the first page and ask for consent as we suggest on the last page of this document. If people surveyed want more info, you can use the info attached to this document. Do not add personal opinions or comments about payphones or general telephone issues to avoid influencing the person surveyed. Read the text and questions to the person exactly as it is written.
6. Read the introductory paragraph to each person before starting in on the questions.
7. If a person refuses to answer a question, do not force them, just leave that answer blank.
8. Remember to thank the person for doing the survey.

Return all completed surveys at the following address:

Union des consommateurs  
1000 Amherst, Suite 300  
Montreal (Québec)  
H2L 3K5

Additional Information to provide upon request:

1. Who are the groups sponsoring this survey?

Public Interest Advocacy Centre, Ottawa  
l'union des consommateurs, Montreal  
B.C. Public Interest Advocacy Centre, Vancouver  
Manitoba Public Interest Law Centre, Winnipeg

These organizations are non-profit groups who represent the interests of ordinary consumers in matters involving public utilities and essential services.

2. Why are they doing this survey?

The survey is being done in order to determine consumer needs regarding payphone service. The CRTC – the federal agency that regulates telephone companies – has initiated a public proceeding on payphone service, and has asked for public comment.

The groups sponsoring this survey intend to file comments on behalf of consumers, based on the information they get from the survey.

3. How do I tell the CRTC what I think about payphone service?

If you have strong views about payphone service, you should let the CRTC know. You can contact the CRTC at a toll free telephone number: 1-877-249-2782 ,  
on the Internet at [www.crtc.gc.ca](http://www.crtc.gc.ca)  
by e-mail at [info@crtc.gc.ca](mailto:info@crtc.gc.ca)  
or by mail at CRTC, Ottawa, Canada, K1A 0N2

The deadline for public comments is June 2, 2003.

A national coalition of consumer groups is undertaking a research project to find out the extent to which people rely on payphones, and the problems, if any, that they have with payphone service.

The interview should require about five minutes of your time. ***Your participation is entirely voluntary.***

***Any information obtained in connection with this study will remain anonymous and non-identifiable.*** We will use this information to help us in our work. All the information from people we talk to gets mixed together so that no one will know about your personal information, and we will not give out your name to anyone. You can refuse to answer any questions I ask you and you can stop the questions at anytime.

Can I go ahead with the survey?

Thank you.

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Location (City + specific place)

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Date