



From Crisis to Recovery: A comparison of how COVID-19 is impacting Businesses in Northern Ontario's western regions.

September Results

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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 role of Workforce Planning Boards is to engage communities and community partners in local labour market development. By conducting and analyzing local labour market research, trends and planning processes, we work to develop community partnerships to find solutions to local issues. NTAB functions as a neutral broker of research, disseminator of information and facilitator of collaborative partnership development.



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.

Table of Contents

Introduction..... 3

Results 4

 Business continuity impact..... 9

 Business human resource impact18

Conclusion20

References21

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 by Northern Policy Institute (NPI), North Superior Workforce Planning Board (NSWPB) of Thunder Bay, the Thunder Bay Chamber of Commerce, and the Thunder Bay Community Development Commission. This survey has been distributed to businesses in the District of Thunder Bay since April.

The Northwest Training and Adjustment Board (NTAB) created a similar survey to better understand the impact of COVID-19 on businesses in the Kenora and Rainy River Districts. NPI teamed up with NTAB for their September survey with the goal of aligning the two surveys.

The results from the survey can be used to compare how the pandemic has impacted local businesses and organizations across communities in Northwestern Ontario.

Results

The comparison of Thunder Bay's and Kenora and Rainy River's Business Impact survey results is summarized below. The survey collection period for the businesses in Thunder Bay was between September 8 – September 22nd, 2020. The Kenora and Rainy River Districts survey results were collected between September 8 – October 14th, 2020. Since the beginning of the September survey, the number of daily cases in Ontario has increased significantly. The number of daily cases increased from 185 on September 8th to 478 on September 22nd (Government of Ontario 2020). This rapid increase in cases indicates that Ontario has entered the second wave, though some regions were faring better than others at that time.

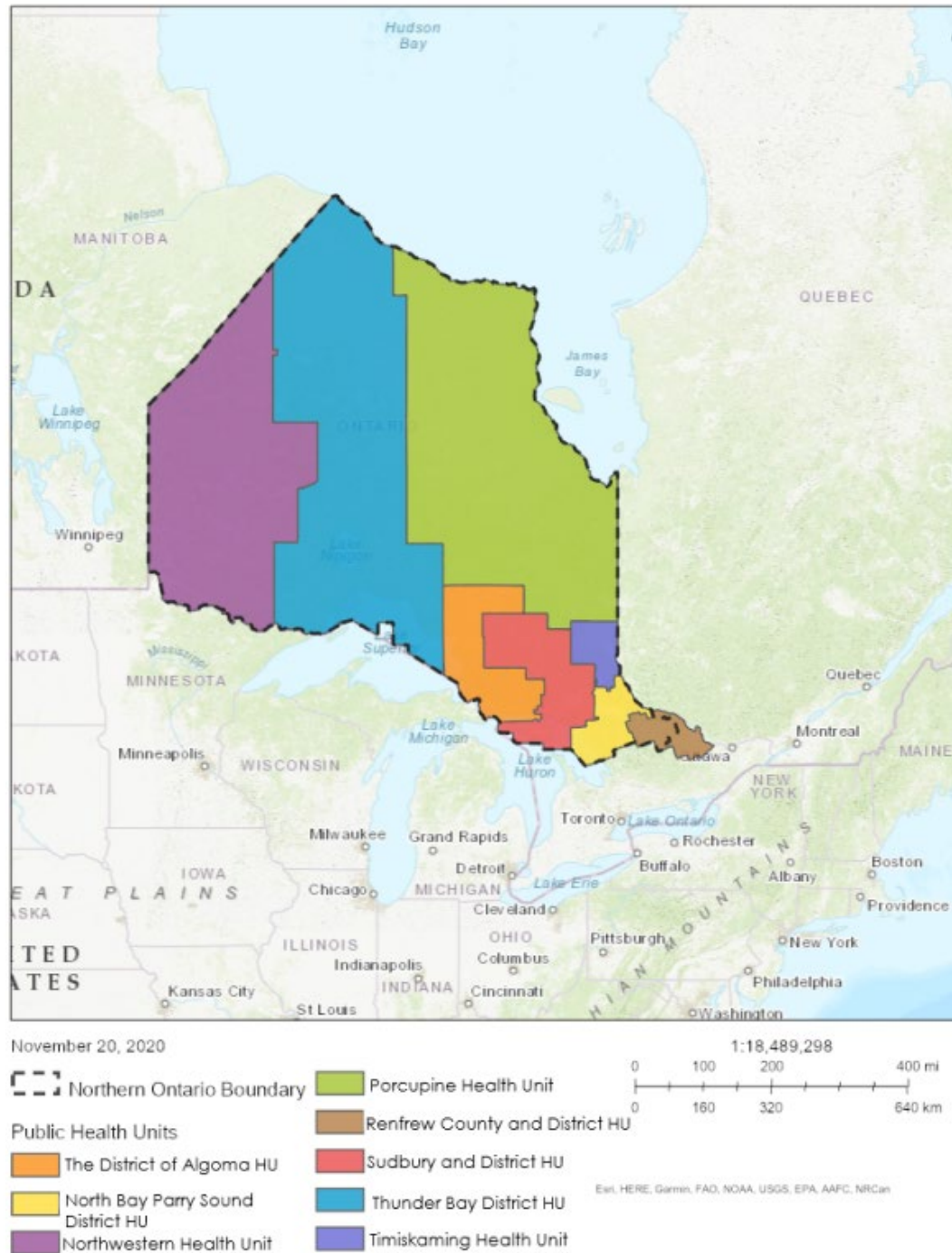
For the Thunder Bay District Health Unit (TBDHU), there were two additional cases reported during the time of the survey (Public Health Ontario 2020) and as of November 12th, 2020, TBDHU reported 143 confirmed cases over the entire pandemic (Thunder Bay District Health Unit 2020). As of November 12, there have been 25 active cases in Thunder Bay. Most confirmed cases are people living in the City of Thunder Bay and surrounding areas.

The Northwestern Health Unit (NHU) reported 24 new cases during the period of the survey (Public Health Ontario 2020). As of November 12, 2020, NHU reported there have been 82 confirmed cases since March (Northwestern Health Unit 2020).¹ In figure 1 you can see the area covered by all the Public Health Units in Northern Ontario.

Since the release of the September survey, things have changed significantly across the province. Increasing COVID-19 cases, a provincial lockdown at the end of December and the implementation of a Stay at Home Order in January. As the new year unfolds, tracking the impacts on businesses will continue to be important.

¹ The Northwestern Health Unit catchment area includes the Dryden/Red Lake region, Kenora region, District of Rainy River and the Sioux Lookout region.

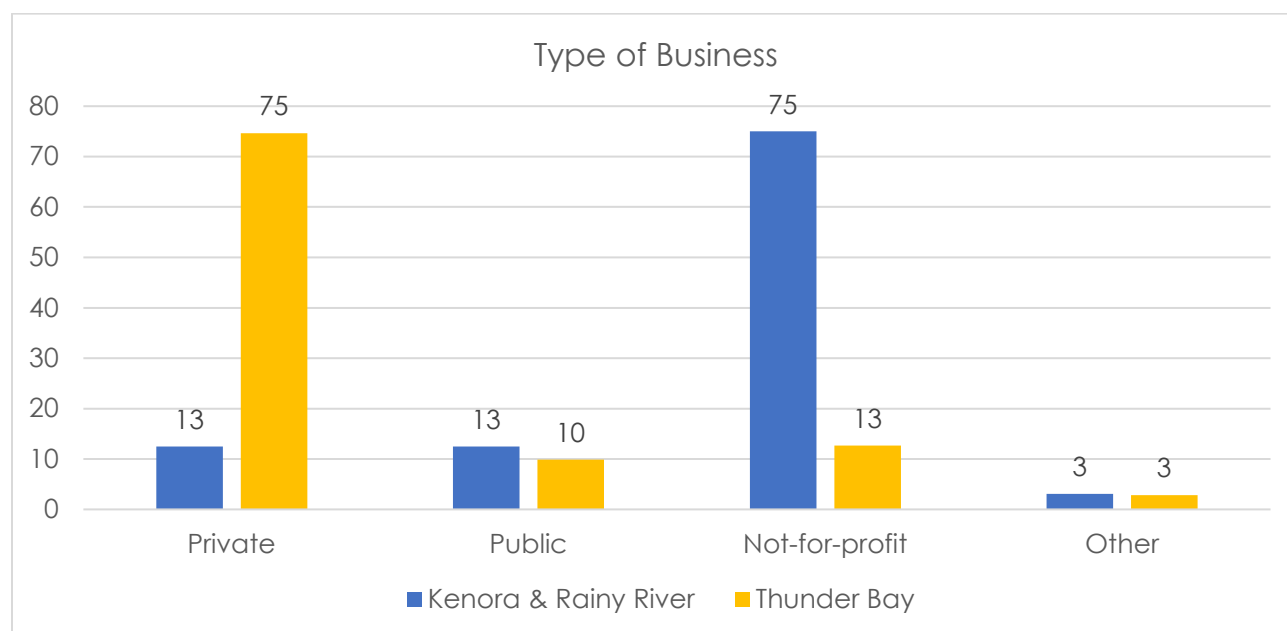
Figure 1: Public Health Unit Boundaries in Northern Ontario



Source: Northern Policy Institute Boundary Map

In September, the Thunder Bay Survey had 71 valid respondents, while the Kenora and Rainy River Districts survey had 32 valid respondents. Unless stated otherwise, all percentages are calculated based on the number of respondents to the relevant question. The majority of the respondents to the Thunder Bay Survey are private businesses, and most of the respondents to the Kenora Survey are not-for-profit businesses.

Figure 2: Percentage of employers that identify with the following type of business



70.4 per cent of the Thunder Bay survey respondents indicated that their primary business is located in the City of Thunder Bay (Table 1). The respondents of the Kenora and Rainy River Districts survey were more distributed with 22.2 per cent of respondents stating their primary business location is in Fort Frances, 19 per cent in Red Lake and 19 per cent stated their business is in Sioux Lookout (Table 1).

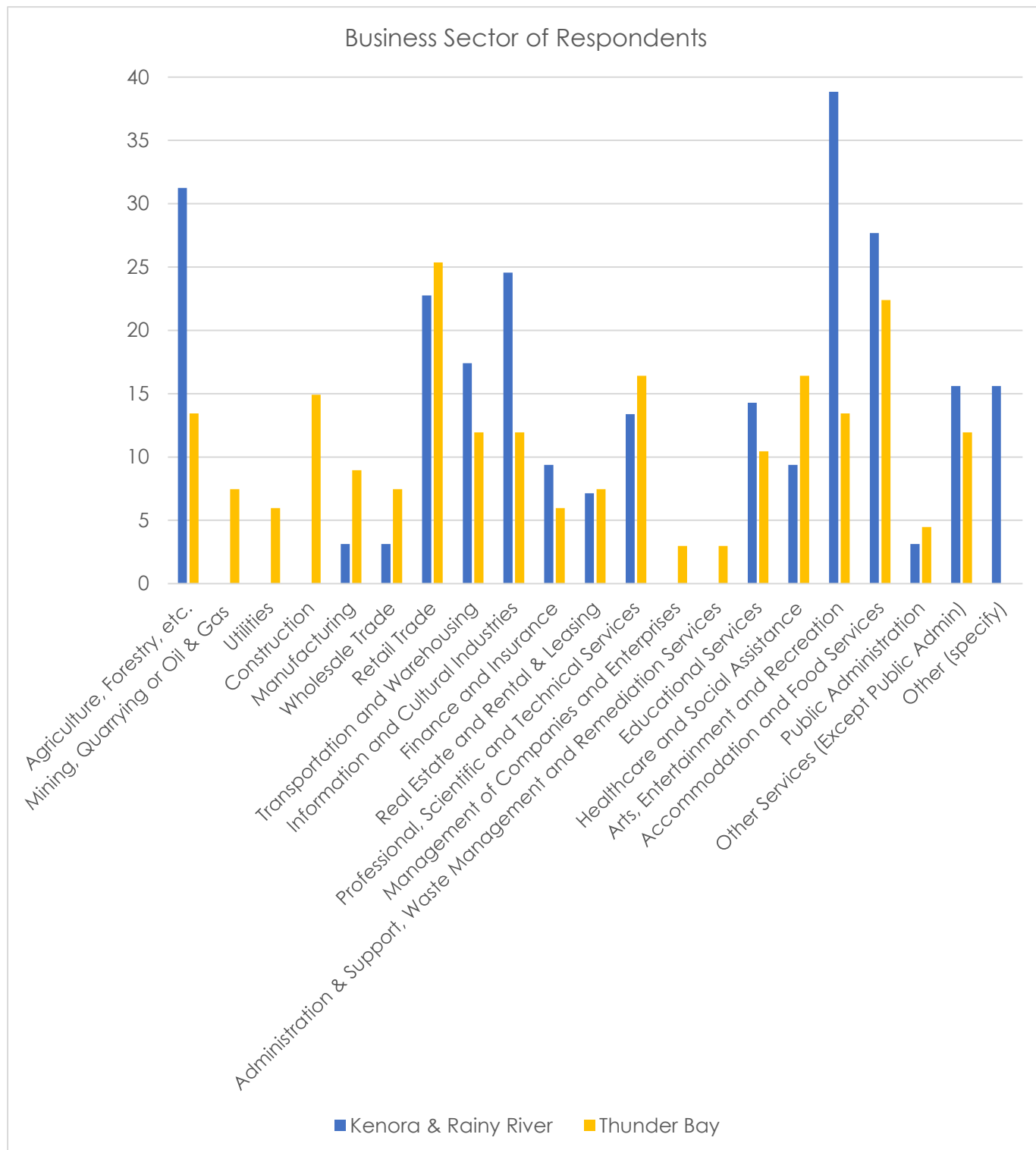
Table 1: Percentage of businesses that stated the region as their primary business location

Primary Business Location	Percentage of Businesses
Thunder Bay District Survey	
Thunder Bay	70.4
Greenstone	14.1
Rosslyn	4.2
Terrace Bay	4.2
Fort William First Nation	1.4
Lac des Iles	1.4
Neebing	2.8
Pass Lake	1.4
Kenora and Rainy River Districts Survey	
Fort Frances	22.2
Red Lake	19
Sioux Lookout	19
Dryden	11
Atikokan	6
Emo	6
Ignace	6
Ear Falls	3
Kenora	3
Rainy River	3
Rainy River First Nations	3

For the Kenora and Rainy River Districts survey, 38.8 per cent of employers indicated that their business/organization operates in the Arts, Entertainment and Recreation sector, 31.3 per cent operate in the Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting sector, and 27.7 per cent are in the Accommodation and Food Sector (Figure 3). There are some sectors that were not represented in the results of this survey because of the low number of survey participants.

For the Thunder Bay District survey, 25.4 per cent of employers stated that their business/organization operates in the Retail Trade sector, and 22.4 per cent work in the Accommodation and Food Sector (Figure 3). The respondents of the Thunder Bay Survey represent a more even distribution of the different sectors than the Kenora Survey. This is likely due to the higher response rate.

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). Meaning the results are not specific to Northern Ontario's western regions but are representative of what is happening across Canada.

Figure 3: Percentage of respondents that indicated the sector(s) their business operates in.

Note: Respondents were asked to indicate their primary and other sectors they operate in. They were asked to indicate all that applied.

Business continuity impact

In September, 19 per cent of employers in Thunder Bay 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), 26 per cent as medium negative (this is going to significantly impact their financials) and 33 per cent as low negative (this may impact their financials, but they are confident they can weather the storm (see Table 2)).

In comparison, during a similar time period, 31 per cent of the proportion of employers in Kenora categorized the risk that COVID-19 poses to the long-term prospects of their business as highly negative. 24 per cent categorized the risk as medium negative and 17 per cent as low negative (See Table 2). The high percentage of respondents that stated the level of risk as high or medium negative is likely due to the high proportion of businesses in the fishing and hunting tourism industry. Survey respondents expressed that the US-Canada border closure has negatively impacted their business because they rely on tourists from the United States. In an article, Gerry Cariou, the executive director of Sunset Country Travel Association, said that 90 per cent of tourists that book lodging to stay at Lake of the Woods are Americans (Kenora Miner & News 2020).

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

Survey	Highly negative (%)	Medium negative (%)	Low negative (%)	None (%)	Low positive (%)	Medium positive (%)	Highly positive (%)
Kenora and Rainy River	31	24	17	3	10	10	3
Thunder Bay	19	26	32	3	7	10	3

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.

A comparison of the risk that COVID-19 poses to long-term business prospects by industry sector is illustrated in Table 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.) The businesses in the goods-producing sectors are mostly in manufacturing and resource extraction. Please note that respondents were asked to state all sectors that applied to their business and most respondents indicated multiple sectors.

For the service-producing industries, the proportion of respondents that indicated their level of risk to long-term prospects of their business was high/medium negative is very similar across the two surveys.

However, for the goods-producing industries, employers from the Kenora and Rainy River Districts have a higher proportion of respondents that stated their level of risk as high and medium negative. 55 per cent of employers in Kenora in the goods-producing industry indicated that COVID-19 could put them out of business and 27 per cent indicated that the pandemic is going to significantly impact their business. Based on the results from the survey, the higher proportions of businesses in goods-producing industries in Kenora and surrounding areas that expect to be negatively impacted by COVID-19 is likely due to the high number of respondents in the Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting Industry. As mentioned above, this sector has been negatively impacted from travel restrictions and border closures.

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

Industry Type	Geography	Highly negative	Medium negative	Low negative	None	Low positive	Medium positive	Highly positive
Goods-producing Industries	Kenora & Rainy River	54.5	27.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	18.2	0.0
	Thunder Bay	17	19	19	0.0	3	25	17
Service-producing Industries	Kenora & Rainy River	27.5	25	15	7.5	17.5	5	2.5
	Thunder Bay	26	22	27	2	5	5	14

Table 4 shows a comparison of the impacts COVID-19 has had on businesses/organizations in Kenora and Rainy River Districts and those in the Thunder Bay District. According to the results, employers in Thunder Bay were having more trouble recalling staff. 27 per cent of employers in Thunder Bay indicated having trouble recalling or hiring employees compared to 6 per cent of employer respondents in Kenora. In addition, a higher proportion of employers in Thunder Bay indicated that they made the following changes to their business: reducing hours, operating online, and/or decided to work remotely. Whereas, a higher proportion of employers in Kenora/Rainy River stated that they have either closed their business temporarily/permanently, or have not been impacted.

Table 4: COVID-19 Impacts on Businesses/Organizations

COVID-19 Impacts on Businesses/Organizations	Kenora & Rainy River (%)	Thunder Bay (%)
We're having trouble recalling or hiring employees	6	27
We've re-tooled to manufacture in-demand supplies	0	6
We are delivering new services	10	18
No impact	16	4
We've reduced hours	13	30
We've reduced staff	16	25
We're working remotely but continuing operations	6	24
We've closed our business/organization permanently	10	0
We've closed our business/organization temporarily	32	17
We've increased hours	6	4
We've increased staff	6	11
We are accepting telephone orders	10	14
We are operating online	10	27
We've developed new partnerships with businesses, non-profits or charities	3	8
We had to work remotely but have now returned to regular operations	19	21
We were closed but have re-opened in limited capacity	10	20
Other business innovations/changes:	10	20

In the COVID-19 business impact surveys, employers were asked their level of concern with the reductions to the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS) (see Table 5). The government announced that the base subsidy rate will drop to 40 per cent³ as of September 27th and the maximum top up will remain at 25 per cent (Canada 2020). As of January 6, the maximum top-up subsidy rate is now 35 per cent (Canada 2021). Based on the results, a greater percentage of employers in Kenora and Rainy River districts are not concerned about reductions to the CEWS. However, a higher proportion of employers in Thunder Bay stated they are not very concerned at 22 per cent. It is important to note that 39 per cent of employers in Thunder Bay that responded to the survey are very concerned about the current reductions to the CEWS in comparison to 14 per cent of respondents in Kenora. It is also interesting that 36 per cent of respondents to the Kenora survey said that they are unsure about their level of concern compared to 3 per cent in Thunder Bay. Overall, it seems that there are mixed feelings about the reductions to the CEWS.

³ Changes to base subsidy rates: July 5-August 29 at 60 per cent; August 29-September 26 at 50 per cent; September 27-October 24 at 40 per cent. As of November, the base subsidy rate has remained at 40 per cent.

Table 5: Level of concern with the reductions to the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy

Level of Concern	Businesses in Kenora & Rainy River (%)	Businesses in Thunder Bay (%)
Not concerned	25	14
Not very concerned	11	22
Somewhat concerned	14	12
Very concerned	14	39
Unsure	36	3
N/A	0	14

As a follow up question, employers were asked “What do you expect the program change will have on operations and/or personnel?” The expected impacts are outlined in Table 6. 36 per cent of the respondents of the Kenora/Rainy River Business Impact Survey stated that they expect the change to the CEWS to have a significant impact on their operation and/or personnel. Similarly, 27 per cent of employers in Thunder Bay expect the change to significantly impact operations.

Overall, employers in Thunder Bay seem to be more concerned about the change to the CEWS. 22 per cent stated that they expect some impact such as not being able to hire new employees, whereas only 4 per cent of employers in Kenora/Rainy River anticipate the change to have some impact on business operations or personnel. Also, 32 per cent of employers in Kenora/Rainy River expect no impact at all.

Table 6. Expected impact from the change to the CEWS on businesses' operations and/or personnel

Expected impact on operations and/or personal	Businesses in Kenora & Rainy River (%)	Businesses in Thunder Bay (%)
Significant impact (e.g. will have to let people go)	36	27
Some impact (e.g. cannot bring on new hires)	4	22
Very little impact (e.g. will delay plans to bring on more people)	7	14
None	32	19
unsure	11	N/A
N/A	11	19

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 7). The results show that most businesses have increased cleaning and/or protective measure in their offices and are having to restrict spending because the uncertainty cause by the pandemic. Also, employers in Kenora/Rainy River and Thunder Bay

have experienced negative financial impacts on their business/organization. For instance, 26 per cent of businesses in Kenora/Rainy River and 33 per cent of businesses in Thunder Bay have experienced an increase in their debt load. Also, 29 per cent of employers that responded to the Kenora/Rainy River survey and 48 per cent that responded to the Thunder Bay survey were experiencing a decrease in sales because of COVID-19. Although some businesses in both regions were experiencing some positive impacts to their business, the majority of businesses have been negatively impacted in some way.

Table 7. Additional Impacts on Businesses/Organizations.

What additional impacts have you experienced (check all that apply)	Businesses in Kenora & Rainy River (%)	Businesses in Thunder Bay (%)
We've increased cleaning, sanitation and/or protective measures in our offices/facilities	42	67
We are having to restrict spending because of the uncertainty	45	57
We are experiencing decreases in sales (or donations if non-profit)	29	48
Our business equity/value has fallen	16	48
Our debt load has increased	26	33
Our supply chain is interrupted	13	33
Our supply chain is experiencing bottlenecks	10	30
We've had contracts cancelled	26	23
We've had to cancel fundraising events (for non-profits)	10	10
We've had to cancel contracts	19	13
We are experiencing significant increase in consumer demand for certain items	19	10
We are experiencing increases in sales	6	11
Our business equity/value has increased	10	8
We have excess perishable supplies	3	2
We've signed new contracts with other businesses	0	5
We've signed new contracts with government	3	2
No Impact	3	0
Other	10	8

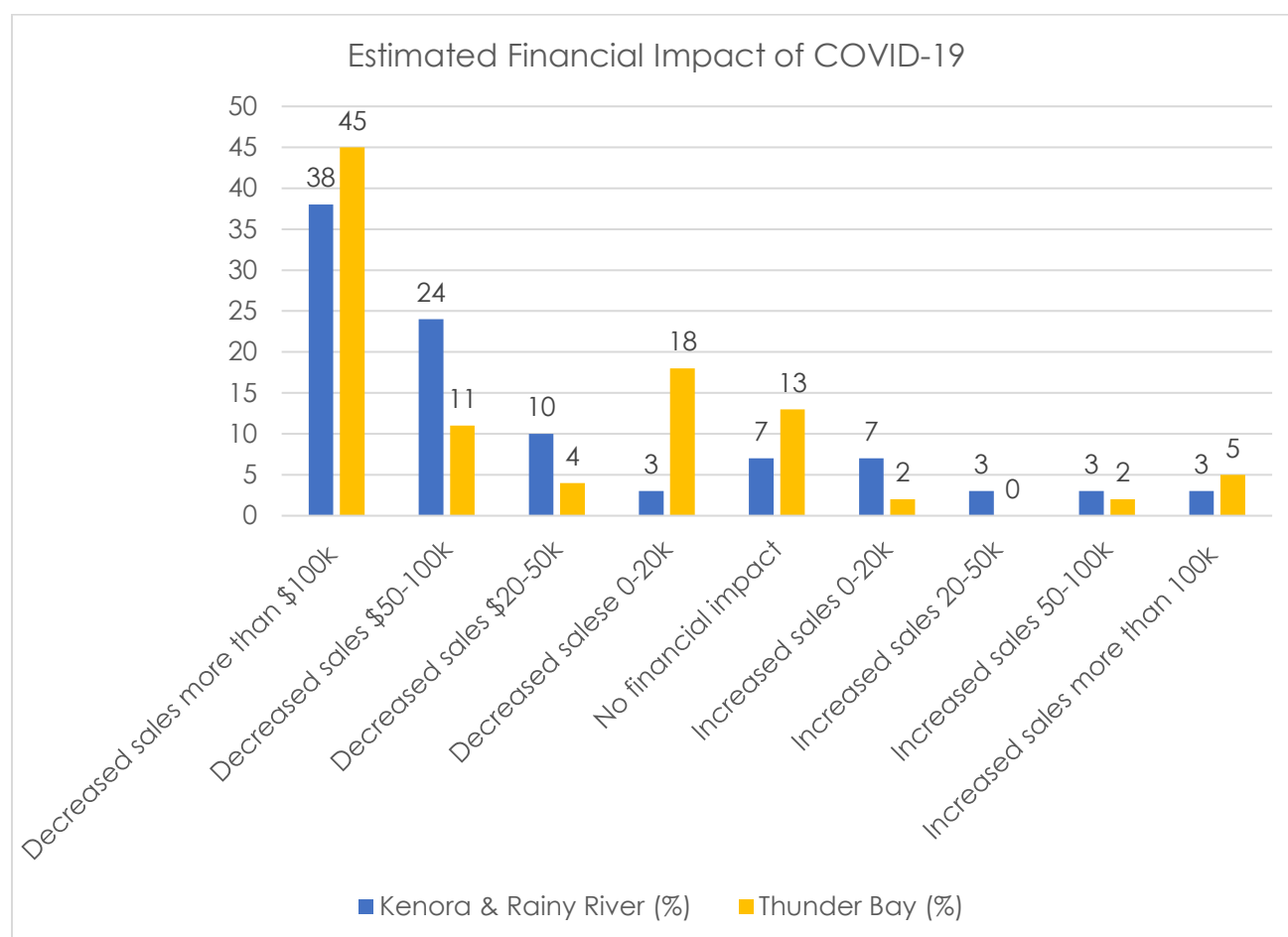
Note: Respondents could choose more than one option.

A large majority of businesses that responded to this survey are negatively financially impacted by the crisis (Figure 4). For employers in the Thunder Bay District, 45 per cent estimated that their sales/ income decreased by more than \$100k. Similarly, 38 per cent of employers that responded to the Kenora/Rainy River survey estimated that their sale decreased by more than \$100K.

A higher proportion of employers in Kenora and Rainy River Districts estimated that their sales decreased by \$50-100K than those in Thunder Bay. However, it is the other way around for the employers that stated they estimate that sales/income decreased by \$0-20K in Thunder Bay.

Overall, the results from this question are similar for both surveys. There are much more employers that are experiencing a decrease in sales than those that have either not been impacted or have experienced an increase in sales since the beginning of the pandemic.

Figure 4. Percentage of employers stating an estimated financial impact that COVID-19 has on their business



The level of satisfaction that employers in the Thunder Bay District and the Kenora and Rainy River Districts have for the Federal and Provincial governments' COVID-19 programs is shown in Tables 8 and 9, respectively.

Based on the results, many employers are neutral regarding most of the Federal and Provincial COVID-19 programs for employers. A possible explanation for the neutral stance could be survey fatigue, lack of familiarity with the program, or that the program does not apply to the employer specifically.

For Thunder Bay, 75 per cent of employers are satisfied with the CEWS, 54 per cent are satisfied with the 10% Temporary Wage Subsidy, and 44 per cent are satisfied with the Canada Emergency Business Account (CEBA). On the other hand, 32 per cent of employers in Thunder Bay are not satisfied with the Canada Emergency Commercial Rent Assistance (CECRA), and 22 per cent are not satisfied with the Business Credit Availability Program (BCAP).

For the Kenora and Rainy River Districts, 41 per cent of employers are satisfied with the CEWS, 32 per cent are satisfied with the 10% Temporary Wage Subsidy 29 per cent are satisfied with the CEBA. In addition, 30 per cent of employers are not satisfied with the Regional Relief and Recovery Fund, and 28 per cent are not satisfied with the Canada Emergency Commercial Rent Assistance (CECRA).

Based on these results, the level of satisfaction with the COVID-19 support programs for employers are similar in the different Northwestern regions of Ontario. There is overall satisfaction for the CEWS and the 10% Temporary Wage Subsidy and an overall dissatisfaction for the CECRA. It is also important to note that very few employers are very satisfied with the government programs (with exception of the CEWS in Thunder Bay)

Table 8. Employer's Level of Satisfaction with the Federal and Provincial COVID-19 Programs for Employers (Thunder Bay District survey results)

Federal COVID-19 Programs for Employers	Very Satisfied (%)	Somewhat Satisfied (%)	Somewhat Unsatisfied (%)	Very Unsatisfied (%)	Neutral (%)
Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy	32	43	11	6	8
10% Temporary Wage Subsidy	10	44	17	6	23
Extending the Work-Sharing Program	2	15	13	7	63
Canada Emergency Commercial Rent Assistance	7	17	15	17	43
Changes to the Canada Summer Jobs Program	2	17	9	4	67
Tax/Remittances Deferral Programs	9	21	6	9	55
Sales Tax Remittance and Customs Duty Payment Deferral	4	20	7	4	65
Business Credit Availability Program	4	15	13	9	60
Canada Emergency Business Account	11	33	13	4	37
Insured Mortgage Purchase Program	0	9	9	2	80
Canada Emergency Response Benefit	9	34	13	9	36
Entrepreneurial Support Programs	0	11	9	2	77
Regional Relief and Recovery Fund	0	9	9	5	77

Industrial Research Assistance Program	2	7	7	0	84
Employer Health Tax Relief	4	18	13	4	60
Regional Opportunities Investment Tax Credit	2	2	7	7	82
Lowering electricity rates	13	23	6	11	47
Large Employer Emergency Financing Facility Program	0	2	7	9	82

Table 9. Employer's Level of Satisfaction with the Federal and Provincial COVID-19 Programs for Employers (Kenora and Rainy River Districts survey results)

Federal COVID-19 Programs for Employers	Very Satisfied (%)	Somewhat Satisfied (%)	Somewhat Unsatisfied (%)	Very Unsatisfied (%)	Neutral (%)
Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy	15	26	19	11	30
10% Temporary Wage Subsidy	8	24	16	4	48
Extending the Work-Sharing Program	0	8	12	4	76
Canada Emergency Commercial Rent Assistance	0	12	12	16	60
Changes to the Canada Summer Jobs Program	4	8	8	4	76
Tax/Remittances Deferral Programs	13	21	0	13	54
Sales Tax Remittance and Customs Duty Payment Deferral	8	20	0	12	60
Business Credit Availability Program	4	13	4	17	63
Canada Emergency Business Account	4	25	21	8	42
Insured Mortgage Purchase Program	0	8	4	4	83
Canada Emergency Response Benefit	4	20	8	8	60
Entrepreneurial Support Programs	0	8	8	4	79
Regional Relief and Recovery Fund	0	13	17	13	58
Industrial Research Assistance Program	0	8	4	4	83
Employer Health Tax Relief	4	13	4	4	75
Regional Opportunities Investment Tax Credit	0	8	8	4	79
Lowering electricity rates	4	25	4	8	58
Large Employer Emergency Financing Facility Program	0	8	8	4	79

The percentage of businesses that stated they were currently using or are going to use the following federal and provincial programs is stated below (Table 10). The most widely used programs for September were the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (60 per cent of employers in Thunder Bay and 58 per cent of employers in Kenora/Rainy River), and the Canada Emergency Business Account (39 per cent for both regions of Northwestern Ontario). For the most part, the results from this question are very similar in both surveys.

Table 10. Percentage of businesses that stated they had or are going to access to one of the following Federal and Provincial programs

	Kenora and Rainy River (%)			Thunder Bay (%)		
	Yes	No	Not eligible	Yes	No	Not eligible
Have you or are you going to access the federal programs? If so which programs? Check all that apply						
Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy	58	17	25	60	17	23
10% Temporary Wage Subsidy	38	24	38	35	37	29
Extending the Work-Sharing Program	0	45	55	4	59	37
Canada Emergency Commercial Rent Assistance	10	38	52	11	47	43
Changes to the Canada Summer Jobs Program	9	41	50	2	55	43
Tax/Remittances Deferral Program	32	42	26	26	46	28
Sales Tax Remittance and Customs Duty Payment Deferral	21	47	32	11	56	33
Business Credit Availability Program	15	50	35	10	60	29
Canada Emergency Business Account	39	26	35	39	41	20
Insured Mortgage Purchase Program	5	40	55	0	57	43
Canada Emergency Response Benefit	15	30	55	17	57	26
Entrepreneurial Support Programs	0	40	60	2	65	33
Regional Relief and Recovery Fund	10	35	55	9	65	28
Regional Opportunities Investment Tax Credit	0	53	47	2	63	35
Industrial Research Assistance Program	0	47	53	5	45	48
Large Employer Emergency Financing Facility Program	0	40	60	0	45	52

Business human resource impact

The percentage of businesses that stated having the following workforce sizes are found in Table 11. In Kenora/Rainy River, most businesses that answered the survey are small businesses. 62 per cent of employers that answered the question have 10-19 employees and 0 per cent have 100 or more employees. Employers in Thunder Bay that answered the survey were also primarily small businesses. 40 per cent have 0-9 employees and 10 per cent have 100 or more.

Table 11. Percentage of businesses that stated having one of the following workforce sizes.

Size of workforce (Number of employees)	Kenora and Rainy River (%)	Thunder Bay (%)
0 to 9	15	40
10 to 19	62	23
20 to 49	15	19
50-99	8	8
100 or more	0	10

Many employers 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 12. As shown in the results, the majority of employers in Northern Ontario's western communities have implemented physical distancing measures.

At the time of the survey, a greater percentage of employers in the Kenora and Rainy River districts were educating their employees regarding the symptoms and risk of the virus, as well as the prevention measures to take. However, 81 per cent of respondents from Thunder Bay were informing their employees of the government assistance programs compared to 26 per cent of respondents from Kenora/Rainy River. It is also important to note that 29 per cent of respondents in Thunder Bay stated that they had to temporarily close their business/organization during the crisis.

Table 12. Percentage of employers that implemented the following measures to support/protect employees during the COVID-19 crisis

	Kenora and Rainy River (%)	Thunder Bay (%)
We've implemented physical distancing measures in our business	61	79
We've educated our employees as to the symptoms and risks associated with the virus, as well as prevention measures	61	29
We've informed employees of the government assistance programs	26	81
We've required employees to work from home	30	44
We've staggered work hours for employees	9	17
We've hired or made employees aware of mental health and well-being resources	13	29
We continue to pay wages to employees that are off work for quarantine or illness.	22	10
We've closed our business/organization temporarily and not paying employees during closure	9	29
We are asking employees to use vacation, sick or personal days during the crisis, and deferring layoffs	9	13
Other (please specify)	17	38

For the open-ended question "What do you think the government can do to assist you right now?", the most common answer at the local level was lowering taxes. In Thunder Bay, employers also believe that the local government should reduce water, hydro and sewer rates for their businesses. And in Kenora, an employer would like the local government to help keep community spaces like the arena open safely at an affordable cost.

At the provincial level, employers stated that governments could help them right now by providing tax relief, following a region-specific shutdown plans, continuing financial assistance, and providing rent relief. Based on the answers, employers want the provincial government to assist businesses in returning to normal, and do not want to go back into lockdown. Also, an employer in Kenora/Rainy River wants provincial spending policies to include rural areas.

At the federal level, employers stated that the government should assist businesses by continuing programs (most noted was extending the wage subsidy), reducing taxes and granting debt forgiveness. A common response from employers in the Kenora and Rainy River districts was that they would like the federal government to open the border to allow US customers into Canada. As mentioned, Kenora and surrounding communities rely heavily on tourists from the United States and the border closure has had a negative impact on their fishing and hunting tourism industry.

Conclusion

Overall, at the time of writing this paper, most businesses in Ontario have reopened and have been able to increase their operations. Employers have worked hard to adapt to this new reality. Some businesses have made physical changes to their store/office in order to provide services and goods to the public while meeting the new health and safety guidelines. Also, 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 taking orders over the phone.

In Thunder Bay, a lower proportion of employers stated that their business prospects are highly or medium negative from previous months. This suggests that business is slowly on the rise and returning to normal. However, this progress would likely not be possible without the continued support from governments and other organizations. The employers who responded to this survey have indicated that all levels of government need to assist local businesses, provide tax relief, provide financial assistance and extend the various programs currently offered in order to recover from this crisis.

For the Districts of Kenora and Rainy River, a high percentage of employers stated that their business prospects are highly and negatively impacted by the pandemic. The differences seen in the results shows that the northwestern communities in Ontario have been disproportionately impacted in certain industries by COVID-19. Certain regions depend more on international tourists and have been severely impacted by the border closure. Another possible contributing factor is market size. Thunder Bay is the largest city in Northwestern Ontario which gives businesses in that region an advantage over smaller surrounding communities. In brief, the comparison of the results show that northern regions of Ontario are distinct from one and another and as a result have different needs.

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