Perception and reality are sometimes at odds with each other. Take the curious case of significant and sustained public anxiety about crime in Winnipeg even as the reported rate for many types of crime decreases. For many years concern about crime in Winnipeg dominated the list of expressed public concerns despite the fact that reported criminal acts were, and continue to be, on a steady decline. Lately, however, evidence from quarterly Probe Research issue tracking shows that concern about crime is on the wane and that perception and reality may be falling into closer alignment.

City-wide research taken in December among 600 adults reveals a remarkable and sudden shift in the issue landscape within the last three months of 2013. Concern about crime has dropped significantly (down to 11% from typical measurements in the mid 30s), while complaints about the crumbling state of city roads, bridges and walkways have replaced crime at the summit of Winnipeg's issue agenda. More than one-in-three Winnipeg adults (35%) now point to infrastructure issues as the most important issue facing their city, with these concerns being particularly acute among those living in southwest Winnipeg (52%), university and college graduates (39%, versus 29% among those with Grade 12 or less) and among those earning higher household incomes (43% among those earning more than $100,000/year).

The considerable level of public concern regarding infrastructure comes as no surprise to Chris Lorenc - President of the Manitoba Heavy Construction Association (MHCA). Mr. Lorenc and his organization have tirelessly advocated for increased public investment in Manitoba's infrastructure. Clearly warnings by the MHCA and other organizations about the province's 'infrastructure deficit' are now being embraced by the public.

"Citizens seem to be fully aware of these challenges and are recognizing how important it is to make investments in infrastructure," Mr. Lorenc said. "Investing in infrastructure is not just an economic issue – it's a quality-of-life issue. People experience this first-hand when they drive on crumbling roads or turn on the tap and nothing comes out because of a water main break."

The rise of two other key issues may also be relegating crime to secondary status. In this most recent survey, fully one-in-five Winnipeg adults reported...

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that they are concerned about civic politics and government issues in general (20%, up from just 4% 12 months earlier). As this was the first survey taken after startling revelations were made about cost overruns and tendering issues pertaining to four city fire halls and a new downtown police headquarters, it is not surprising that many Winnipeggers are now turning their attention to municipal politics.

The other concern which is steadily gaining traction is taxation. In December 2012, just five percent of those surveyed volunteered this as a key issue. In September 2013, the proportion of Winnipeggers concerned about high levels of taxation reached 13 percent, dropping slightly to 10 percent in this most recent sounding. Much of this is clearly related to the fallout from the provincial government’s controversial decision last spring to increase the PST to eight percent, but this also reflects concerns about annual municipal property tax increases and other tax/fee hikes.

So is this a blip, or a long-term realignment of public opinion? Mike Sutherland, president of the Winnipeg Police Association, attributes the decrease concern about crime to several interrelated factors. While an overall decrease in reported crime may be a partial influence, he also notes that fear of crime is closely related to media coverage of serious incidents. Recently, the Winnipeg Police Service began scrambling its scanner frequencies so that media outlets can no longer listen live to officers as they attend crime scenes. Because of this, the nature of reporting serious crimes has become less immediate, with reporters covering murders, stabbings, sexual assaults and other violent crime in a more “sanitized way” – that is, somewhat after the fact and at a greater distance than before.

Mr. Sutherland believes that sudden violent incidents – such as a turf war between rival gangs, for instance – may push concern about crime higher again. However, he notes that for the vast majority of Winnipeggers, fear of crime is largely mediated through news reports whereas concern about crumbling streets or aging water pipes is something every Winnipegger sees first hand.

“I think (concern about crime) sort of ebbs and flows,” Mr. Sutherland said. “And with your daily commute to work, you often run into the problems you see with the condition of the roads, and it’s a daily reminder in a very concrete and tangible way. Whereas in terms of crime, if you live in a neighbourhood with very few incidents of crime, you may obtain your perception through the reporting that occurs and the amount of prominence these incidents are given.” he said.

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For more information on our syndicated studies, please contact us at probe@probe-research.com or (204) 926-6565.

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**Probity**

From the Files of Probe Research

29% - Percentage of Winnipeg residents who told us in a Dec. 2013 poll that they would vote NDP in a provincial election, if one were held the following day. In the 2011 election, by contrast, more than one-half of Winnipeg voters (52%) cast their ballots for the governing party.

41% - Percentage of Winnipeg residents who would vote Progressive Conservative in the same hypothetical election noted above. This represented a six percentage point increase over the party’s 2011 election result.

45% - Percentage of Winnipeg residents who told interviewers that they would vote for 2010 mayoral contender Judy Wasylycia-Leis in a 2014 civic election that would see her stand against Gord Steeves, Paula Havixbeck, Brian Bowman or Scott Fielding. Her support was strongest in the northern half of Winnipeg (48% in northwest Winnipeg; 49% in the northeast), but weaker in the southern half of the city (25% in southeast Winnipeg).

25% - Percentage of Winnipeg residents who would vote for former councillor Gord Steeves in the same hypothetical mayoral race. Steeves’ lead was strongest in southeast Winnipeg (59%), where his former St. Vital ward is located.