



# The Impact of COVID-19 on Canadian Search Traffic

Double-digit increases in engagement with  
extremist content in Canada's six largest cities

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June 2020



## Background

Moonshot CVE has been monitoring engagement with violent far-right extremist content on search engines in Canada since February 2019. During this time, Canadians' search traffic has notably spiked in response to international crises or extremism-related events, such as the January 2020 arrest of ex-Canadian Forces reservist Patrik Mathews, an alleged Manitoba recruiter for The Base, a white supremacist group. The global COVID-19 pandemic has led to various lockdown measures being imposed across Canada and increased public demand for digital services. As Canadians spend more time at home and on the internet, there are also concerns that this may shift patterns of engagement with violent extremist content online.

This report explores the impact of social distancing measures on engagement with online violent far-right content in six Canadian cities; Montréal-Laval, Ottawa, Toronto, Calgary, Edmonton and Vancouver. It presents Moonshot's initial findings, based on an assessment of search traffic from the end of January to the end of April. Moonshot will review these findings over the coming months to assess trends over time.

## Key findings

- There was a statistically significant increase in searches for violent far-right extremist content in Ottawa, Montréal-Laval, Calgary and Edmonton. Search traffic in Toronto and Vancouver also increased, but not to a statistically significant degree.<sup>1</sup>
- Like many Canadians, at-risk individuals are seeking more engaging media content during the lockdown: average weekly searches for violent far-right radio and podcasts increased by 330%, and 324% for video games. Average searches for extremist slogans and symbols decreased by 23%
- Ottawa experienced the greatest increase in extremist-related search traffic (34.7%) since Ontario's the state of emergency was declared.

**Weekly Searches for violent far-right keywords have increased since lockdown across all six Canadian cities by an average of**

**18.5%<sup>2</sup>**



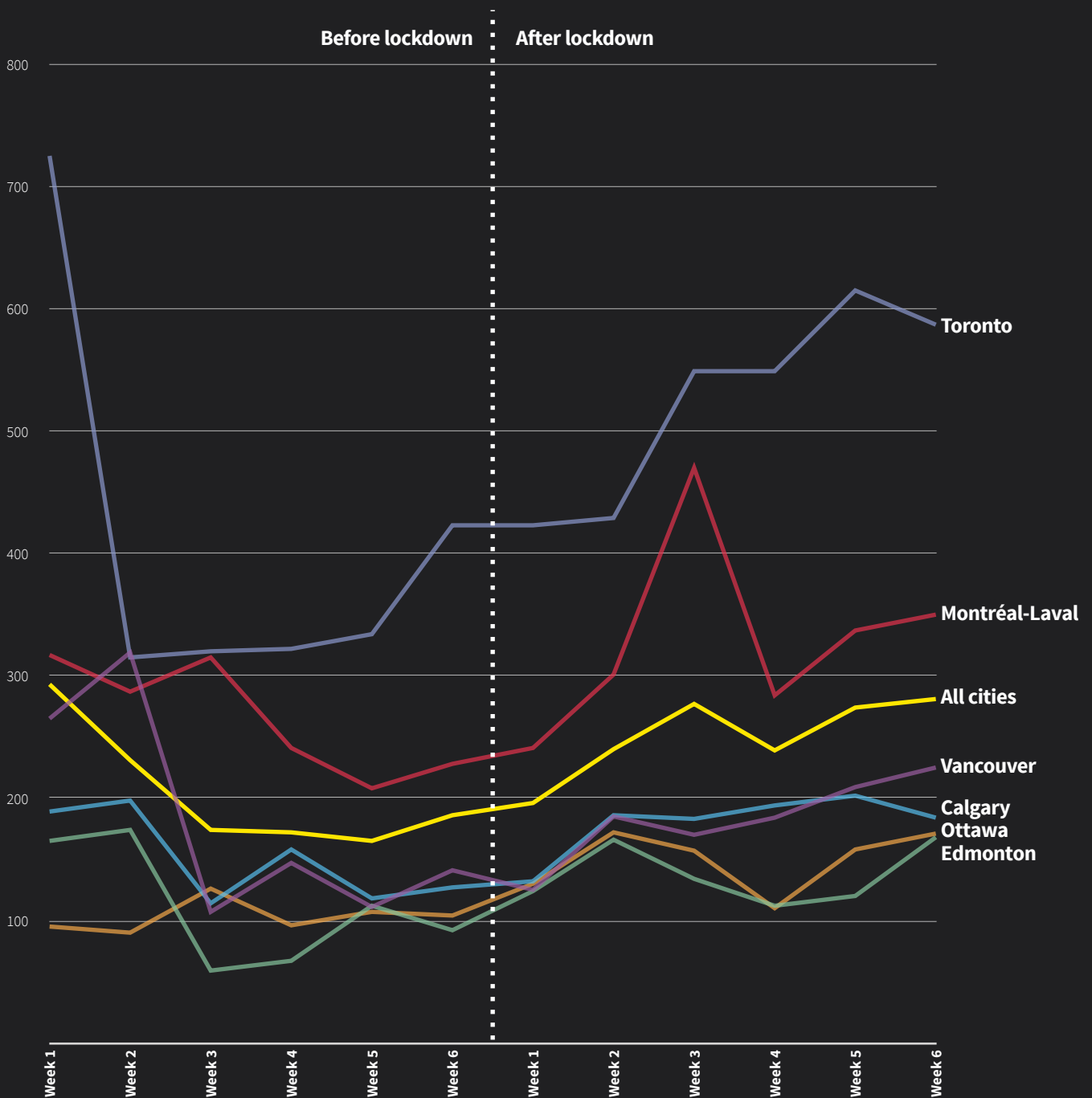
<sup>1</sup>Toronto: two-sample t-test,  $t=1.04$ ,  $p=0.3$ ; Vancouver: two-sample t-test,  $t=-0.07$ ,  $p=0.95$ .

<sup>2</sup> We found a moderate positive correlation between search volume and time spent under lockdown:  $r=0.59$ ;  $p=2.19E-32$ .



## Methodology

This analysis is based on 12 full weeks of search data in six Canadian cities. Moonshot collected an initial six weeks of data prior to when a state of emergency order was introduced in each province, and six weeks of data following the date of that order. Search phrases related to violent extremism were coded by content type (e.g. video; radio and podcasts; tattoo) and a graduated risk level. Factors that determine a risk level include the use of specific words or phrases implying prior knowledge of extremist ideology or media, or searches that indicate a clear intent to commit acts of violence.





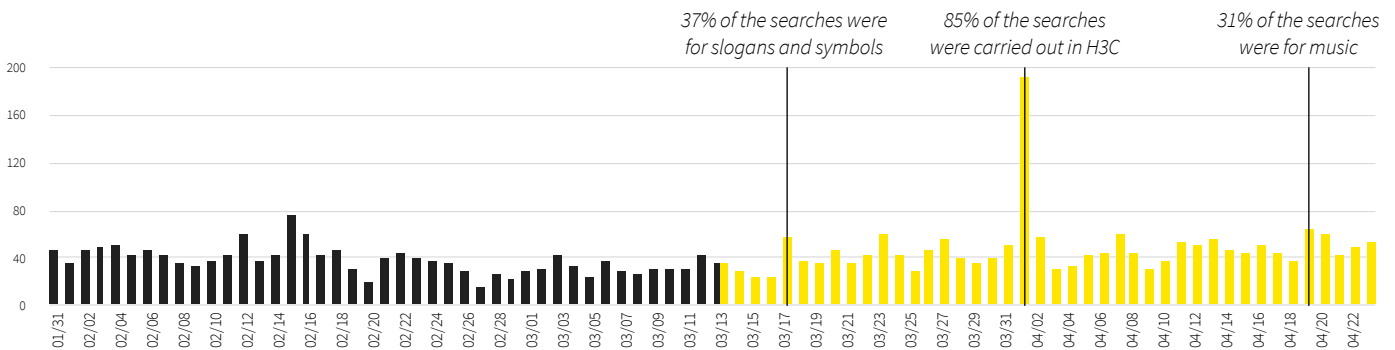
# City-level findings Montréal-Laval

## Key findings

- Searches in Montréal-Laval during lockdown increased by 24.2%.
- Of the six cities surveyed, Montréal-Laval has seen the greatest increase in average weekly searches for **violent far-right radio and podcasts (520%)**.
- On April 1, there was a spike in violent far-right search traffic; 85% of the searches on that day were made in **Griffintown**.
- This spike indicated significant search interest in VFR merchandise, such as “iron cross badge”. **Merchandise-related searches have increased by 300% in Montréal-Laval since Québec’s state of emergency was declared.**

## Search timeline

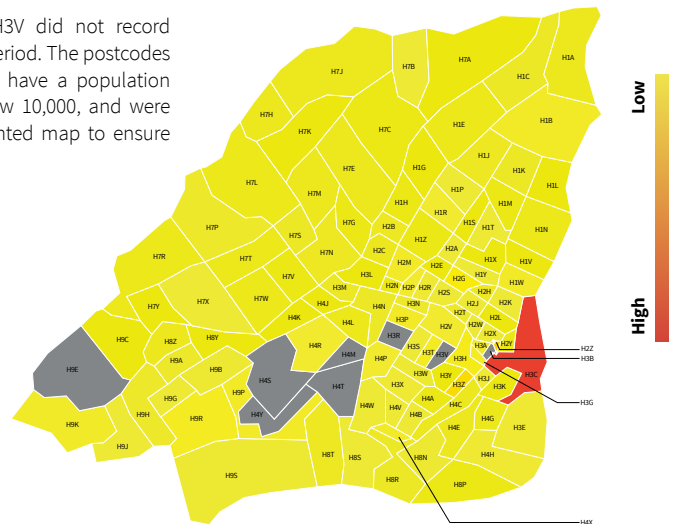
● Before lockdown ● After lockdown



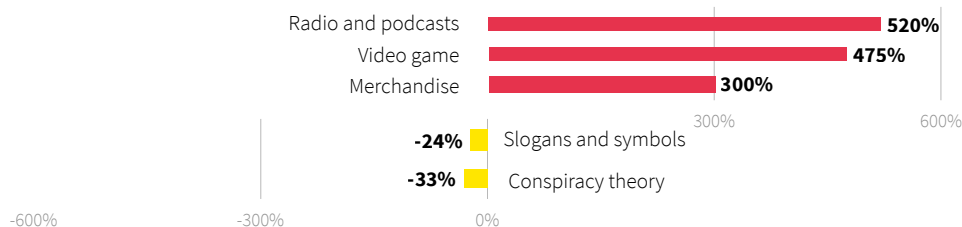
## Most active postcodes post-lockdown

Postcodes	Searches per 10,000 population*
H3C	228.92
H2Z	47.56
H3Z	38.09
H2G	24.57
H3H	21.55
H9R	19.70
H3T	19.51
H3G	18.77
H3A	16.76
H3P	16.65

\*H9E, H4M, H3R and H3V did not record search data during this period. The postcodes H4Y, H3B, H4T and H4S have a population and dwelling count below 10,000, and were excluded from this weighted map to ensure statistical significance.



## Change in search traffic for violent far-right content





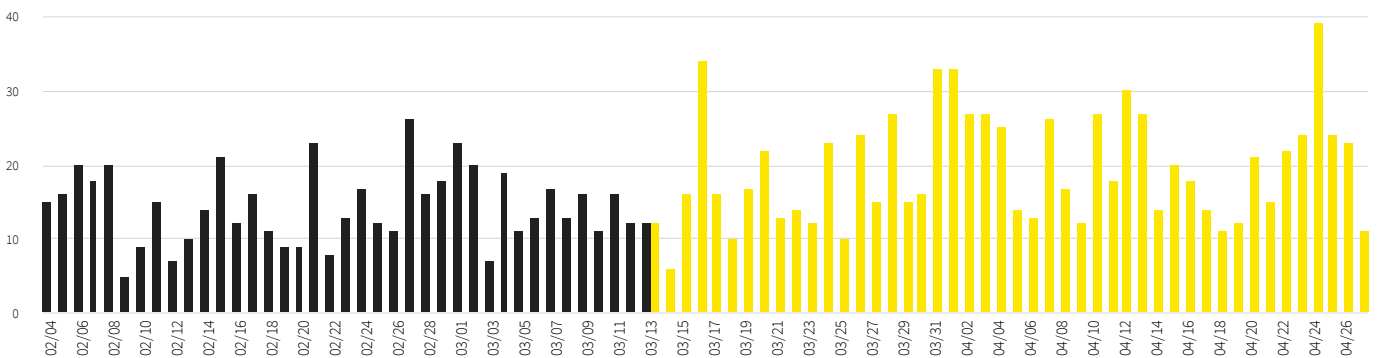
# City-level findings Ottawa

## Key findings

- **Ottawa experienced the largest increase in search traffic for violent far-right content during lockdown:** average weekly searches increased 34.7%.
- **In the first six weeks of lockdown, Moonshot recorded 92 searches for “The Greatest Story Never Told”,** making up 91% of all video-related searches in Ottawa. This nearly six-hour documentary, popular amongst the violent far-right, glorifies Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany through historical revisionism.

## Search timeline

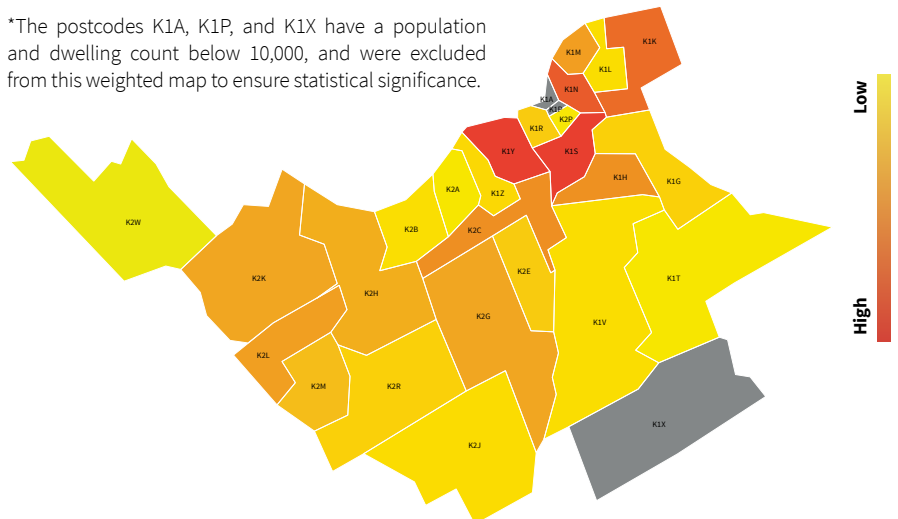
● Before lockdown ● After lockdown



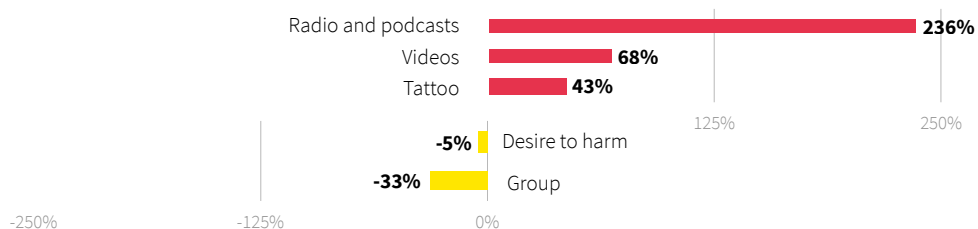
## Most active postcodes post-lockdown\*

Postcodes	Searches per 10,000 population*
K1Y	31.86
K1S	31.75
K1N	25.54
K1K	22.37
K2C	16.82
K1H	16.46
K1M	14.94
K2L	14.61
K2G	13.61
K2K	13.51

\*The postcodes K1A, K1P, and K1X have a population and dwelling count below 10,000, and were excluded from this weighted map to ensure statistical significance.



## Change in search traffic for violent far-right content



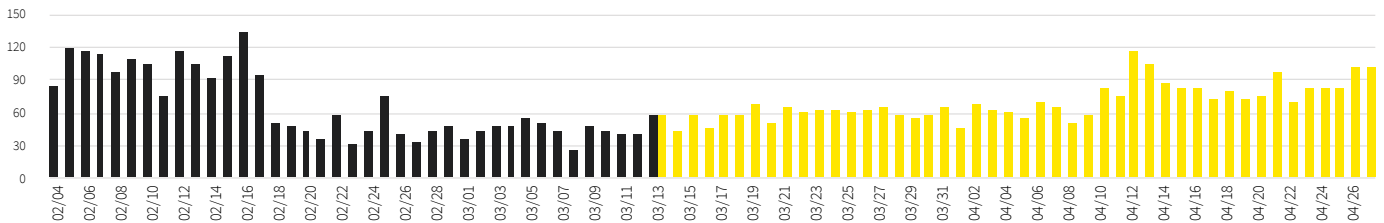


# City-level findings Toronto

## Key findings

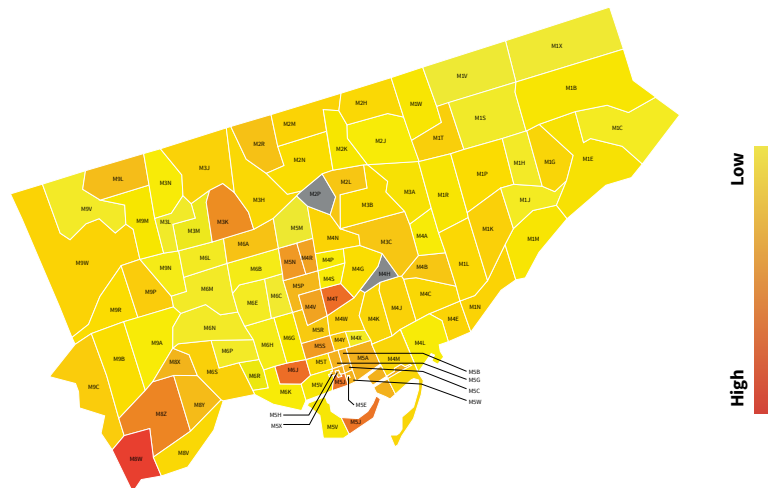
- Searches in Toronto during lockdown increased by 8.4%.
- **Average weekly searches for violent far-right radio and podcasts increased by 421% and 486% for video games;** the most popular keywords were respectively “Freedomain Radio Podcast” and “Custer’s Revenge” (a 1982 game in which players attempt to rape an indigenous woman).
- **High-risk searches increased by 81%;** half were for how to make a Molotov cocktail, a rudimentary explosive device used by paramilitary forces and rioters.
- **Moonshot recorded 123 searches for the white supremacist forum Vanguard News Network:** 113 were in the postcode M8W (Etobicoke - Alderwood / Long Branch). This search pattern may indicate that a person or a group of people in the area is regularly accessing the website and engaging with violent far-right content.

## Search timeline ● Before lockdown ● After lockdown



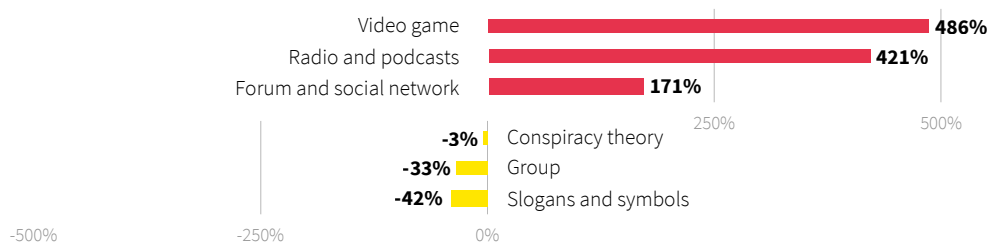
## Most active postcodes post-lockdown

Postcodes	Searches per 10,000 population*
M8W	62.40
M4T	42.05
M6J	41.61
M5J	39.19
M8Z	34.04
M3K	31.68
M5N	27.69
M5S	27.32
M4R	25.45
M4V	24.67



\*The postcodes M2P and M4H recorded no search data during this period. Due to the low population of some downtown Toronto postcodes, a single campaign was created to incorporate and weight searches in M5G, M5B, M5H, M5C, M5X, M5K, M5L, M5E, M7A and M5W.

## Change in search traffic for violent far-right content



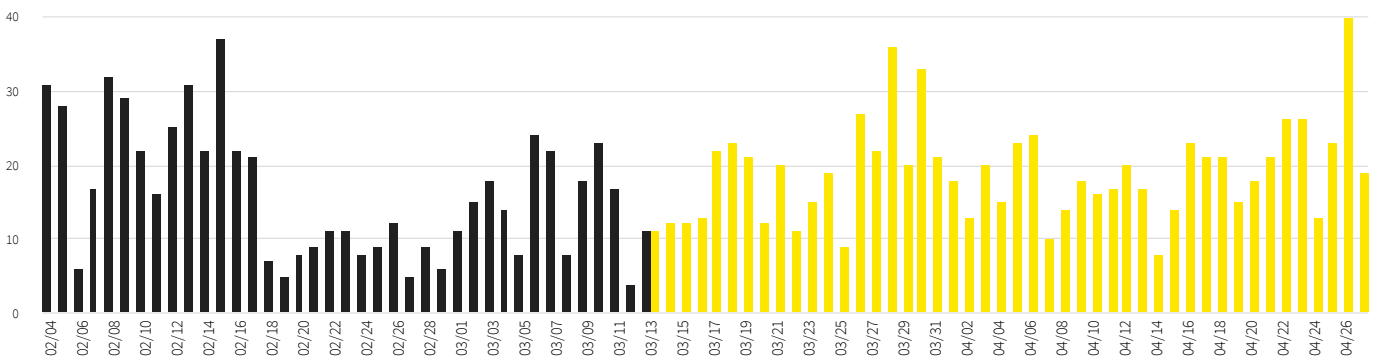


# City-level findings Edmonton

## Key findings

- Searches in Edmonton during lockdown increased by 23.2%.
- **Searches for radio and podcasts increased 253%.** The three most popular search terms were "Alex Jones Info Wars Podcast," "Gavin McInnes podcast" and "Freedom Radio Podcast."
- **Searches for violent far-right forums and social networks increased by 174%.** A quarter of searches were for The Right Stuff, a white supremacist and neo-Nazi blog that is known for advocating white nationalist conspiracy theories.

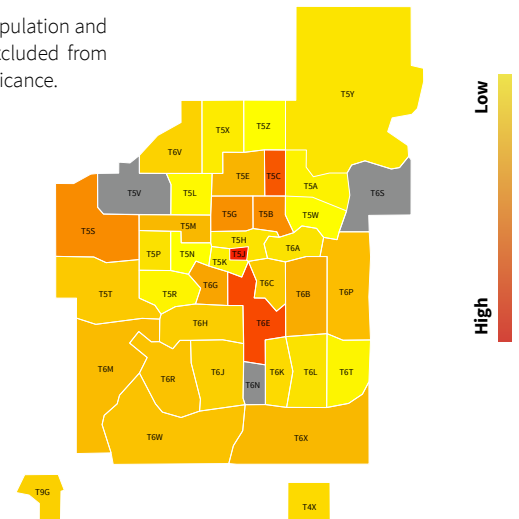
## Search timeline



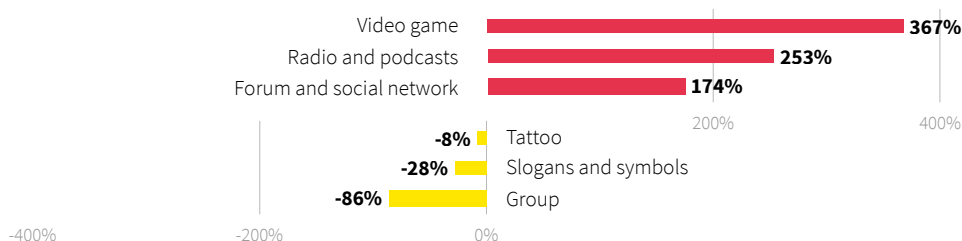
## Most active postcodes post-lockdown

Postcodes	Searches per 10,000 population*
T5J	35.98
T6E	28.23
T5C	25.94
T5S	18.58
T5B	18.42
T5G	17.98
T6G	15.04
T6B	13.68
T5E	12.72
T5M	11.79

\*The postcodes T6N, T5V and T6S have a population and dwelling count below 10,000, and were excluded from this weighted map to ensure statistical significance.



## Change in search traffic for violent far-right content



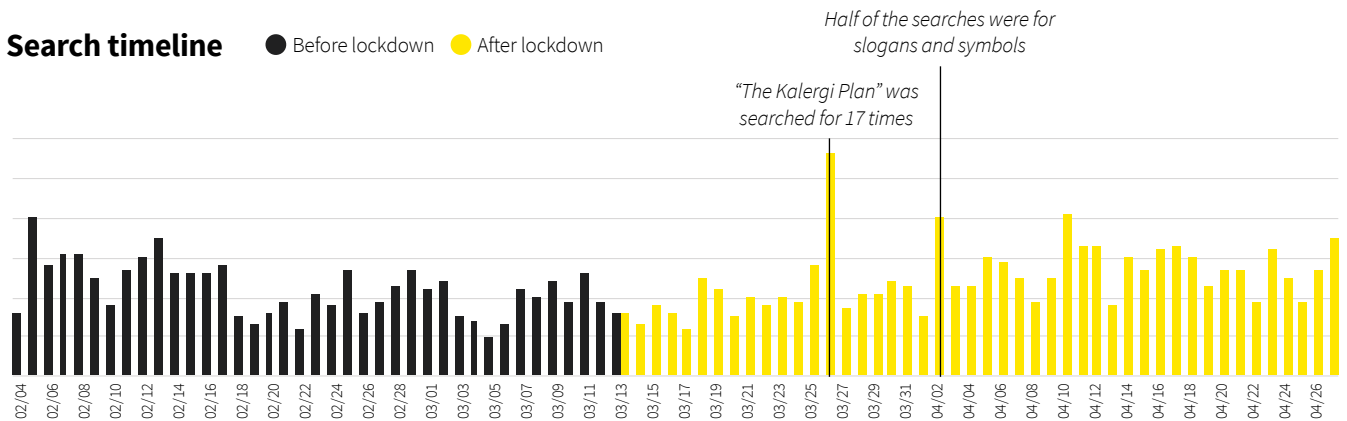




# City-level findings Calgary

## Key findings

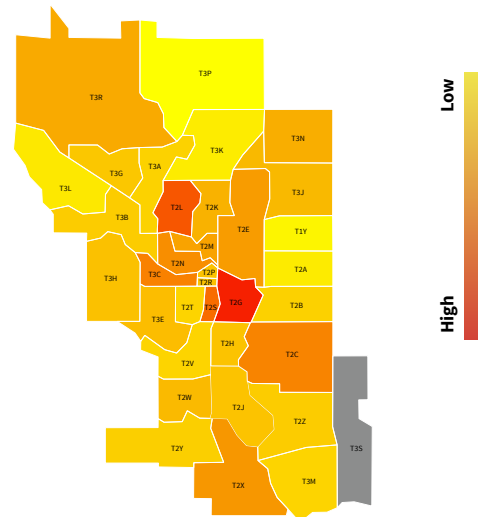
- Searches in Calgary during lockdown increased by 19.6%.
- **High-risk searches increased by 70%.** These searches include keywords that indicate a desire to harm (e.g. “kill all jews”) or to engage with a violent movement or ideology (e.g. “how to join Ku Klux Klan”).
- Following the imposition of social distancing measures, 82% of high-risk keyword searches in Calgary were for instructions on how to build explosive devices. For example: **“How to make a molotov cocktail” was searched for 34 times and in 20 different postcodes.**



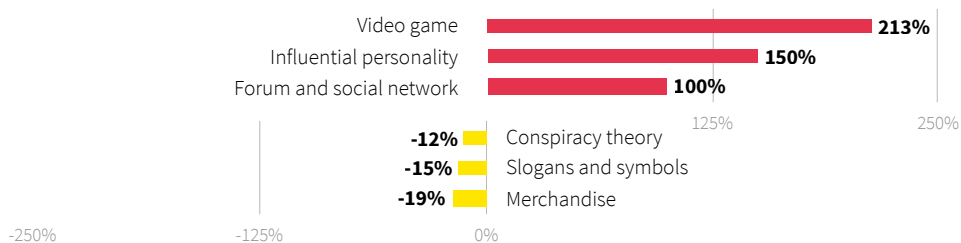
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Postcodes	Searches per 10,000 population*
T2G	24.36
T2L	18.29
T2S	16.40
T3C	14.46
T2C	14.21
T2N	13.29
T2X	12.69
T2E	12.09
T2M	11.38
T3R	10.89

\*The postcode T3S has a population and dwelling count below 10,000, and was excluded from this weighted map to ensure statistical significance.



## Change in search traffic for violent far-right content







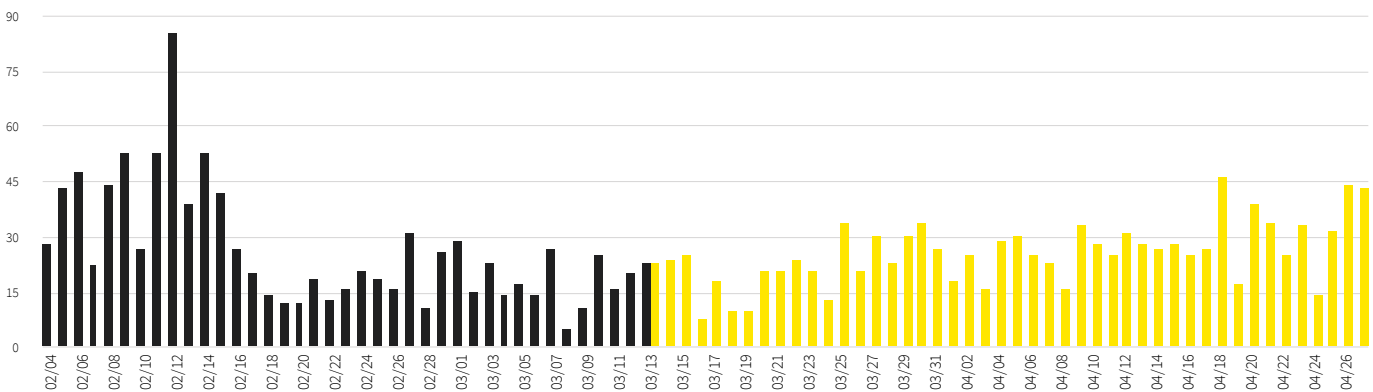
# City-level findings Vancouver

## Key findings

- Searches for violent far-right keywords increased by 0.7%.
- Although the increase in weekly searches failed to meet statistical significance, the trends in VFR search traffic are in line with other cities: **there was a considerable increase in searches for radio and podcasts (456%), and a decrease in searches for violent far-right slogans and symbols (-47%).**

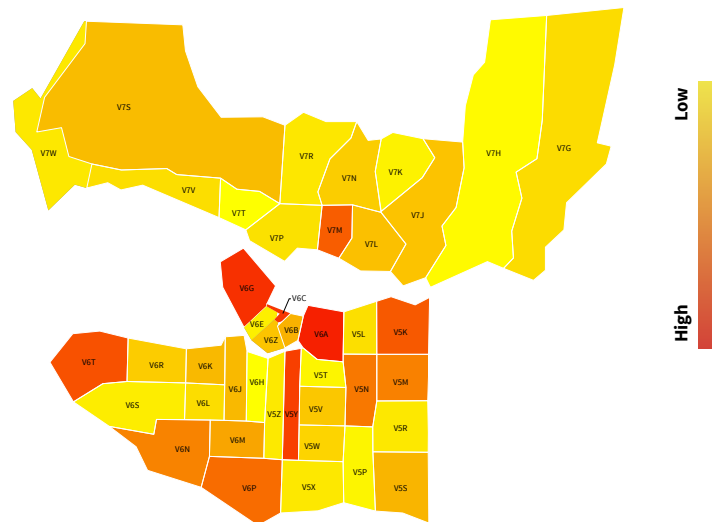
## Search timeline

● Before lockdown ● After lockdown



## Most active postcodes post-lockdown

Postcodes	Searches per 10,000 population
V6A	36.33
V6G	32.72
V6C	31.32
V5Y	30.23
V6T	27.51
V5K	26.50
V7M	25.77
V6P	23.78
V5N	21.97
V5M	20.82



## Change in search traffic for violent far-right content

