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PROVINCIAL POLITICS

Premier Doug Ford's anti-price gouging push sparks more than 26K complaints from consumers

By **Robert Benzie** Queen's Park Bureau Chief

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Premier Doug Ford's push against retailers' pandemic price gouging has triggered more than 26,000 consumer complaints to the government, newly available data reveals.

But it appears as if public concerns over the practice have tapered off in recent months.

Early in the [COVID-19](#) outbreak last March, Ford blew a gasket after a [Toronto grocer](#) was selling [Lysol disinfectant wipes](#) for \$29.99, which usually cost a fraction of that.

Even though Ontario's state of emergency, which ran from March 17 until July 24, has officially ended, the Progressive Conservatives extended the order against [price gouging](#).

"We recognize that Ontario families still need access to necessary goods, including protective supplies, to address the ongoing threat of COVID-19 as the province continues its path to recovery," Government and Consumer Services Minister Lisa Thompson's office said in a statement to the Star.

"Since the order was announced on March 28, more than 26,000 consumers have reported incidents of alleged price gouging through our online web page and call centre," said Thompson's office.

"Most complaints have been about hand sanitizer, face masks, disinfecting wipes, and toilet paper. Hand sanitizers and face masks represent over 50 per cent of the complaints filed through the online form," her office added.

Some 900 of the "most egregious complaints" have been referred to police forces throughout Ontario to determine whether charges will be laid.

As of Aug. 17, more than 1,650 notifications "have been sent to businesses across the province advising them that they have been reported for allegedly selling necessary goods for prices that grossly exceed the price for similar goods available to like consumers, contrary to the order."

Thompson's office said there were 3,400 individual complaints about those businesses, which have not been publicly identified.

"Further action may be taken by the ministry with respect to nam(ing) businesses, as appropriate," her office added.

Complaints to Queen's Park have slowed to a trickle over the summer. As of May, there had been 22,500 lodged, meaning there were around 3,500 in the ensuing three months.

That suggests consumers are no longer hoarding pandemic-related items and that there are adequate supplies on store shelves at

fair prices.

Under Ontario law, it is illegal for businesses and individuals to be “fixing prices (or) charging unconscionable prices for necessary goods, services and resources.”

Such goods include medical masks and surgical gloves used as personal protective equipment (PPE), non-prescription medications to treat coronavirus symptoms, disinfecting and cleaning agents, and personal hygiene products like soap and toilet paper.

Scofflaws face stiff fines ranging from \$750 to \$100,000 plus a year in jail for individuals, \$500,000 and incarceration for company directors or officers, and \$10 million for corporations.

Ford, who was on a campaign-style swing through Bracebridge on Friday, had warned the government would be “coming after” businesses that try to exploit the pandemic.

“Nothing gets me more furious than someone taking advantage of the public that are in desperate need of these items. That hits a nerve when people are being taken advantage of,” he said in March.

“I have zero – zero – tolerance for price gouging. That’s disgusting, absolutely disgusting.”



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