



KEY FINDINGS AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**National Opinion Survey to Determine Levels of
Preparedness for a Public Health Crisis**

FEBRUARY 2007

Methodology

The *National Opinion Survey to Determine Levels of Preparedness for a Public Health Crisis* is a national on-line survey among 925 adults, including 523 members of the general public, and over samples of 210 mothers with children up to five years old, 306 hourly-wage workers, and 409 adults with chronic medical conditions. The survey was conducted between February 9-13, 2007 by Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Incorporated.

Concurrent with the survey of the general public, a national on-line survey of 120 employers and 150 school superintendents and principals was conducted from February 9-25, 2007.

In-depth interviews were also conducted with five regional food bank managers and four local food pantry and soup kitchen managers. Participants were recruited with an eye toward regional and geographic diversity. Interviews were conducted by telephone between February 12-20, 2007.

Key Facts

Most people are not prepared for a public health crisis, and a majority acknowledge their lack of preparedness.

- 32% of the public have taken no special steps to prepare for an emergency situation such as a public health crisis. An additional 55% have taken some steps, but acknowledge they could do more.
- By their own admission, an 87% majority have not taken enough steps to prepare for a public health crisis, and know they could do more.
- 40% of the public have taken steps to prepare in the past, but admit they have let their preparedness plans lapse.

Many people believe that they are more prepared than they actually are.

- More than one-quarter (27%) of the public claim to be prepared for a public health crisis, but only half of those (14%) actually have a three-day supply of food, water, and medication.
- And nearly half (46%) the public have not pulled together a Disaster Supply Kit.

The term public health crisis does not resonate with people. However, the public is concerned about the events that might lead to one.

- Just 26% of the general public thinks it is likely that they or their family will be affected by a public health crisis in the next year or two, and only 27% believe that a public health crisis in the area that they live is likely in the next year or two.
- Yet 57% of the public thinks it is likely that a severe storm such as a hurricane, tornado, flood, or blizzard could lead to a public health crisis in the area they live in the next few years. Forty-seven percent think a serious health crisis from an outbreak of infectious disease such as the flu is likely. An additional 43% believe that an outbreak of a food-borne disease is likely.

Additional Quick Facts

Many vulnerable subgroups of the general public as well as key institutions in society lag behind where they should be on preparedness.

- 58% of mothers of children age five and younger admit that they do not have a three-day supply of water on hand for their family in an emergency.
- 83% of mothers of children age five and younger say they have at least a three-day food supply on hand for their whole family, but only 34% have set aside non-perishable food for an emergency. An additional 29% have set aside some food but probably not enough.
- 61% of people with chronic health conditions have at least a two-week supply of medications and 58% are at least fairly confident that they have sufficient first-aid supplies to last at least three days.
- Only 18% of employers say they could continue to pay all their employees if there were an interruption in operations. Hourly workers realize this, and 63% believe that their employers would not continue to pay them if their place of work shut down because of a public health crisis. However, only 15% have saved enough money to provide for their family in such an event.
- Only one in five (19%) hourly workers have practiced what to do in an emergency situation at work.
- Only 37% of employers think that a major public health crisis will affect their organization in the next year or two.
- Approximately half of employers (47%) report having done some things to prepare, but say they know they should probably do more. And 15% of employers have taken no special steps to prepare.
- Only 18% of employers are in compliance with having a three-day supply of food, water, medications, and first aid supplies.
- 47% of school administrators have an emergency response plan that includes planning for a public health emergency, and more than two-thirds have conducted staff training and student drilling to practice their schools' preparedness plans.
- A large majority (84%) of the school administrators included in this study have evacuation plans in place and 64% have communications plans to contact students' families in the event of a public health crisis.
- Nearly three in four (70%) school administrators report that their schools are prepared to serve as a community shelter.
- Fewer than one in five (18%) school administrators has enough fresh drinking water on hand and only 23% have a sufficient supply of food to provide for their students for at least three days.

- Regional distribution centers that provide inventory to local food pantries and food banks have invested a great deal of time and resources into preparedness planning. Many are involved in local, state, and national disaster response and preparedness efforts with organizations such as America's Second Harvest, the Red Cross, the United Way, and local, state, and federal government agencies.
- Many local emergency food distribution centers, such as food banks, pantries, and soup kitchens that provide direct assistance to individuals and families are not prepared for an emergency situation, such as a public health crisis. Few have disaster response plans in place and few are connected to local, state, or national disaster response efforts.
- Cost is a major barrier to preparedness for the general public, as well as employers and schools.

Key Findings

Many people are not as prepared as they should be, think they are, or were in 2002. Few (27%) American families would be fully prepared with adequate food, water, medications, and other supplies if forced to stay in their home for three days or quickly leave their homes in response to a public health emergency. Most (87%) people realize that they are not as prepared as they should be but still many others believe that they are more prepared than they really are. Compared with the simple standard that each household, school, and place of employment safely store at least a three-day supply of water, food, medicine, and first aid and other basic supplies, most survey respondents admit that their own level of preparations would come up short. Just 27% of the public has a three-day supply of food, water, and medicine and a reliable first aid kit. Indeed, 40% tell us that they were more prepared in the recent past (such as the period shortly after September 11, when anthrax and Cipro led the nightly news), but since then they have let their level of planning and preparation drift and deteriorate.

Understanding The Barriers And The Strategies To Overcome Them

The survey findings reveal a deeper understanding of why Americans are so ill prepared, and suggest clear strategies for closing the gaps. The findings help us understand both the non-rational and rational processes at work for most citizens. The non-rational side includes the 38% of the public who say that among the reasons they have not planned is that they simply would rather not think about what would happen in a public health crisis, as well as the 44% who do not believe in worrying about things that may or may not happen in the future.

On the rational side, many people believe that they are more prepared than they actually are. Among the 27% of the public who believe that they are very or fairly well prepared for a public health crisis, fewer than half (48%) actually meet the three-day supply standard.

The survey findings also help uncover the implicit cost-benefit calculations involved in decisions to store away supplies for what the public may perceive as an unlikely need. To raise the benefit side of the equation, it will be necessary to define a public health crisis in a way that motivates people to action. Rather than a dictionary definition of a public health crisis, that only 27% of the public see as very or somewhat likely to strike their community, the survey suggests the importance of defining a public health crisis by its likely causes. To make Americans see the importance of planning for a public health crisis, it is important to broaden the discussion to include the potential that severe storms, hurricanes, tornados, blizzards, or outbreaks of common or exotic infectious diseases, and many other disasters have to cause a public health crisis in their community. The public is twice as likely to worry about a natural disaster (37%) as a public health crisis (18%). They may not really know what a public health crisis is, but they have experience with major storms and they readily accept that storms or other emergencies could cause disruptions in basic services such as electricity, water, transportation, and grocery and drug stores, leading to a public health crisis.