



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

**FEBRUARY 2007**

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## 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

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**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**

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**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.
- Less 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.

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- 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

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**M**any 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 Strategies to Overcome Them

The survey findings reveal a deeper understanding of why Americans are ill prepared, and suggest clear strategies for closing the gap. 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 is 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 severe storms, hurricanes, tornados, blizzards, 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.

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## Results Among Important Groups

In addition to the general public, APHA queried individuals representing important groups for public health planning: mothers of young children, people with chronic medical conditions, hourly workers, employers, and kindergarten -12<sup>th</sup> grad school superintendents and principals. The most interesting finding is that these groups responded quite similarly throughout the survey. In most cases the differences between them were quite small. Findings are reported separately where there are meaningful differences.

## The Term “Public Health Crisis” Does Not Resonate as Much as the Things That Might Cause One

Few in the public believe that their family or community is likely to experience a public health crisis in the near term. At the same time, however, the public used surprisingly high scores to evaluate the likelihood of potential causes of a public health crisis. The public believes that a natural disaster is more likely than a public health crisis to happen in their area.

- When asked what concerns them most—preparing for a natural disaster, a public health crisis, or a terrorist attack, 37% of the public identifies preparing for a natural disaster as their primary concern. This is nearly twice the proportion (18%) who identify a public health crisis as their primary concern. The same proportion (18%) identifies preparing for a terrorist attack as their primary concern.
- School administrators are more in tune than the public and employers of the prospects for a public health crisis in their community. Similar to the public, 37% of employers say they are most concerned about preparing for a natural disaster. Whereas 41% of the school administrators identify a public health crisis as their greatest concern and more than one-third (35%) identify preparing for a natural disaster as their greatest concern.
- The public, employers, and school administrators think that the likelihood of their community experiencing a public health crisis is low.
  - Only 26% of the public views a public health crisis as very or somewhat likely to affect them or their family personally in the next year or two. On the other hand, two-thirds (66%) of the public believe that it is very (29%) or somewhat (37%) *unlikely* that their family will be affected by a major public health crisis.
  - Similarly, just 27% of the public views a public health crisis as very or somewhat likely to affect their community in the next year or two. The lack of difference between these two questions makes it clear that it is not the case that people believe this is something that happens to others but not them. Few people believe that a public health crisis is likely to happen to them or their community.

- While mothers of young children are slightly more likely (26%) than the public in general to identify a public health crisis as their top concern, just 18% say it is very or somewhat likely to affect their family. Seventy-four percent of mothers believe that it is very or somewhat unlikely that their family will be affected by a major public health crisis in the next year or two.
  - Employers are somewhat more likely than the general public to think a public health crisis will affect their community, with 37% indicating that they think such an event will occur in the next year or two. However, 64% believe that it is very or somewhat unlikely that their organization will be affected.
  - School administrators mirror employers in terms of their perspective on whether a public health crisis will affect their community or their school in the next year or two. Thirty-eight percent report they think a public health crisis will occur in their community, but nearly two-thirds (62%) believe it is very or somewhat unlikely that their school or school system will be affected.
- Much of the public’s apparent indifference about a public health crisis is probably linked to the fact that few have ever been affected directly by one. Only one in 10 respondents have ever been directly affected or had a family member or close friend directly affected by a public health crisis. Fifteen percent (15%) know of someone, such as an acquaintance, who has been affected, and more than two-thirds (68%) of the public do not know anyone or have not in any way been affected by a public health crisis.

### **The Public Views Major Storms as its Communities’ Most Likely Crisis, but the List of Possibilities Is Long**

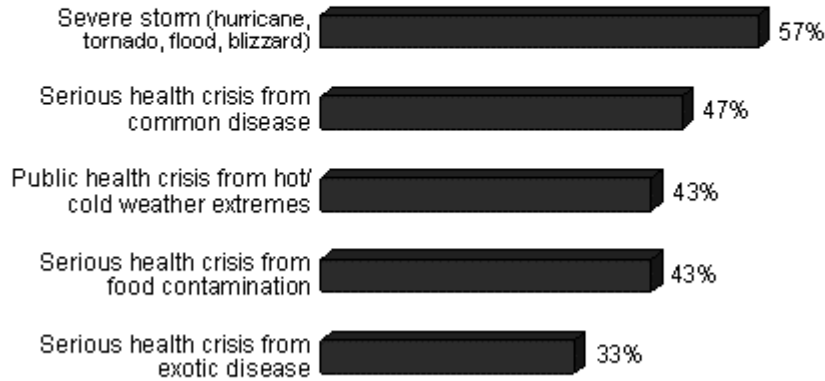
While the public, employers, and to a lesser extent school officials may not relate to the term “public health crisis,” they understand and relate to natural and man-made events that could lead to a public health crisis. Study participants were given a list of 12 events that could cause a public health crisis and asked to rate the likelihood of each event occurring in their community in the next year or two, using a nine-point scale with end points labeled “very unlikely” and “very likely.”

- By a substantial margin, the public views severe storms as the most likely event, with 57% selecting a “6” or higher, including 27% who choose an “8” or higher.
- Three events are essentially tied for next most likely, with “a public health crisis caused by extremes of hot or cold weather” rated as a “6” or higher by 43%, an outbreak of the flu (47%), and a health crisis from food contamination, such as *E.Coli* (43%).
- The other events on the list fall into a third tier of likelihood. But while they are rated less likely than the others, they add up to a world of possible catastrophes and unknowable risks. Taken together, half (49%) believe that it is very likely that at least one of these events will occur in their community in the next few years, scoring at least one event as an eight or nine on the nine-point scale.

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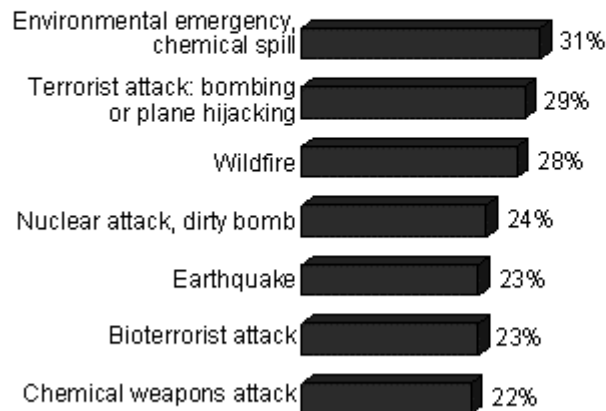
## Events Most Likely To Lead To Public Health Crisis

■ Very/somewhat likely (6-9 ratings on nine-point scale)



## Events Less Likely To Lead To Public Health Crisis

■ Very/somewhat likely (6-9 ratings on nine-point scale)



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## Emergency Preparedness Is On Americans' Minds—Just Not As Much As It Was Five Years Ago

One of the most basic, yet important findings of this study is that the American public has the capacity to take emergency preparedness fairly seriously. Immediately after 9/11, when anthrax, terrorist attacks, and dirty bombs were on people's minds, many families took the time to pull together disaster-response kits and family communication plans to be prepared in the event of an emergency situation. As time has passed, the prospects of these events have faded into the background amid the competing priorities of daily life, and emergency preparedness plans have lapsed. The public, employers, and school administrators candidly assessed their own preparedness and acknowledged that they could and should be more prepared.

- Three-quarters (75%) of the public believe that the average person has a role in preparing for a public health crisis.
- Nearly two in five (38%) say they place a very (10%) or somewhat high (28%) priority on preparedness for a public health emergency.
- Only 3% of the public, however, consider themselves very well prepared, 24% say they are fairly well prepared, with a plurality of 37% consider themselves just somewhat well prepared. Another one-third of the public candidly assess themselves as not very well prepared (25%) or not prepared at all (8%).

### How Well Prepared Are You?

	General Public	Mothers With Young Children	Hourly Workers	People With Chronic Illness	Employers	School Administrators
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Very well prepared	3	1	4	3	3	8
Fairly well prepared	24	13	22	26	27	27
Just somewhat well prepared	37	45	42	38	39	42
Not very well prepared	25	31	19	27	22	21
Not prepared at all	8	7	9	5	7	2

- Mothers of young children do not consider themselves as well prepared for a public health emergency—with nearly half (45%) describing themselves as just somewhat well prepared.
- Similarly, only 3% of employers consider themselves very well prepared for a public health crisis, 27% are fairly well prepared, and a plurality (39%) consider themselves just somewhat well prepared.

- School administrators consider themselves slightly more prepared than do other groups included—61% report that they place a somewhat or very high priority on preparedness for a public health emergency. Still, only 8% consider their school or school system to be very well prepared in the event of a public health emergency, 27% think they are fairly well prepared, and 42% just somewhat well prepared. Only 2% consider their schools to be not prepared at all.

## What Have You Done To Prepare?

	<u>General Public</u> %	<u>Mothers With Young Children</u> %	<u>Hourly Workers</u> %	<u>People With Chronic Illness</u> %	<u>Employers</u> %	<u>School Administrators</u> %
We are fully prepared for an emergency situation	2	-	2	2	10	12
We've done a great deal, but are not fully prepared	8	9	10	12	24	45
We've done some things, but could do more	55	53	56	58	47	39
We've taken no special steps	32	38	28	26	15	3

- More than half (55%) the public admits that they have done some things to prepare for an emergency situation, but could do more. In fact, 40% of the public took steps to be prepared in the past, but have not maintained their preparedness plans.
- One-third (32%) of the public, 38% of mothers with young children, and 26% of people with chronic health conditions have not taken any steps to prepare for an emergency situation. Only 2% of the public considers themselves fully prepared.
- Similarly, 35% of employers acknowledge that they took steps to prepare in the past, but have let their emergency preparedness plans lapse. Only 10% of employers assess themselves as fully prepared for an emergency situation and nearly half (47%) indicate that they have done some things to prepare, but could do more. Fifteen percent (15%) of employers have taken no special steps to prepare for an emergency situation.
- While only 12% of school administrators feel that their school or school system is fully prepared for an emergency disaster, 84% have done at least some things to prepare. Schools appear to be more on top of their preparedness planning than the public and employers, with 64% regularly assessing their preparedness planning in an effort to keep the plan current.

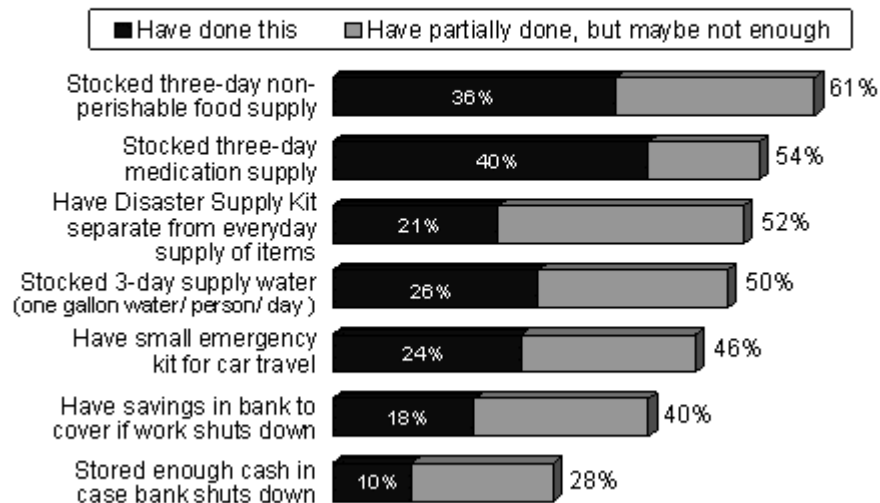
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## Americans Are Only Partially Prepared and Need Guidance on What Steps to Take

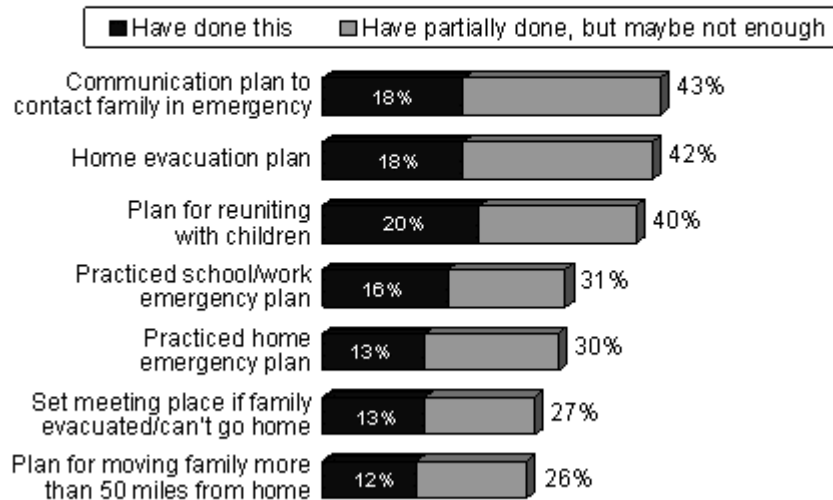
While most individuals, employers, and school administrators report they have done some things to prepare for an emergency situation or a public health crisis, when asked more detailed questions about exactly what steps they have taken, it becomes clear that most Americans are not fully prepared. The public, employers, and school systems could benefit from easily accessible, user-friendly information that defines preparedness and provides steps to getting there.

- Two-thirds (65%) of the American public have spent two hours or less time preparing for an emergency situation. Most have focused on the basics of stockpiling non-perishable food, water, and medications, and preparing a Disaster Supply Kit. Many, however, lack sufficient quantities of these basic supplies. For example, more than half the public does not have at least a three-day supply of water on hand, and many elements of full preparedness are lacking or missing altogether, such as family communication and evacuation plans.

### Self-Reported Preparedness: *Assembling Supplies*



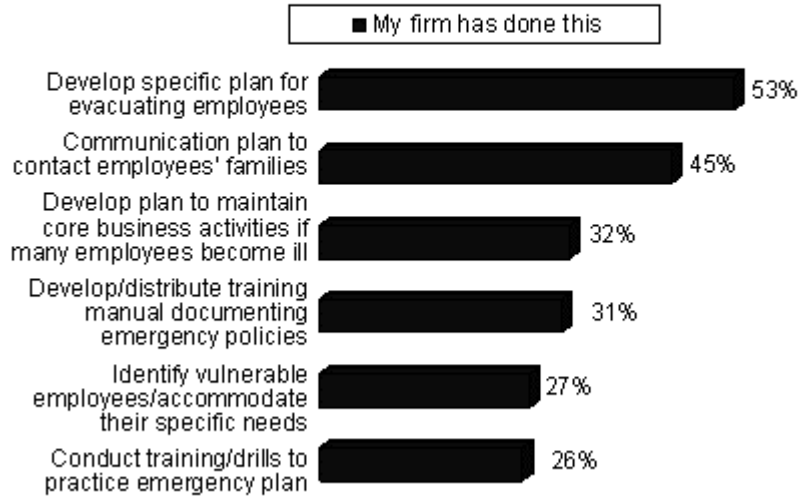
## **Self-Reported Preparedness: *Establishing Plans***



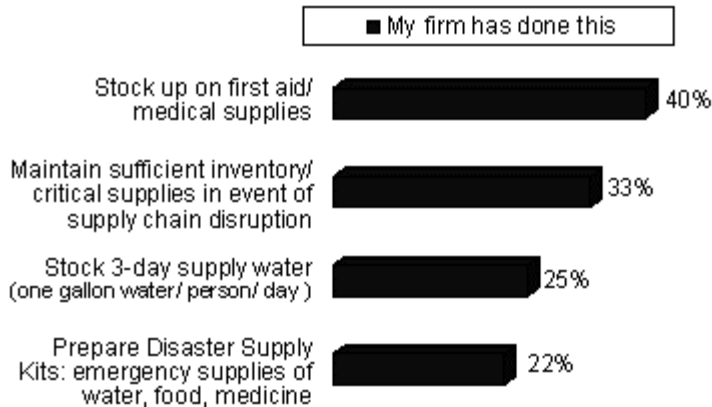
- Individuals with chronic health conditions are more likely than the general public and the other subpopulations included in this study to have at least partially undertaken most of the steps to preparedness with which they were presented. Nearly two-thirds (61%) of people with chronic health conditions have at least a two-week supply of medications compared with 49% of the general public.
- Mothers of young children are the least prepared on many elements of preparedness (e.g., preparing a Disaster Supply Kit, having a specific evacuation plan, drilling on how to respond during an emergency at home).
- Hourly workers are more likely than any other group to at least to some degree have drilled on what to do in an emergency at school or work and at home.
- One-third of employers (33%) have an emergency plan that includes specific provisions for a public health crisis. Only 31% have developed and distributed an emergency preparedness staff training manual, just over half the employers who participated in this study (53%) have a specific evacuation plan, and only 25% have enough drinking water on hand to last their employees three days.

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## Self-Reported Preparedness: *Establishing Plans*

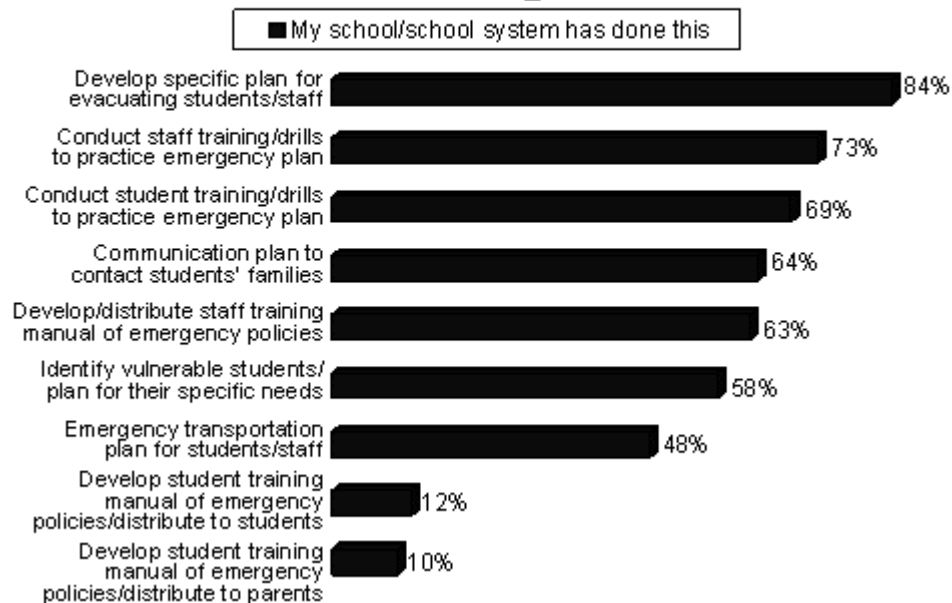


## Self-Reported Preparedness: *Assembling Supplies*



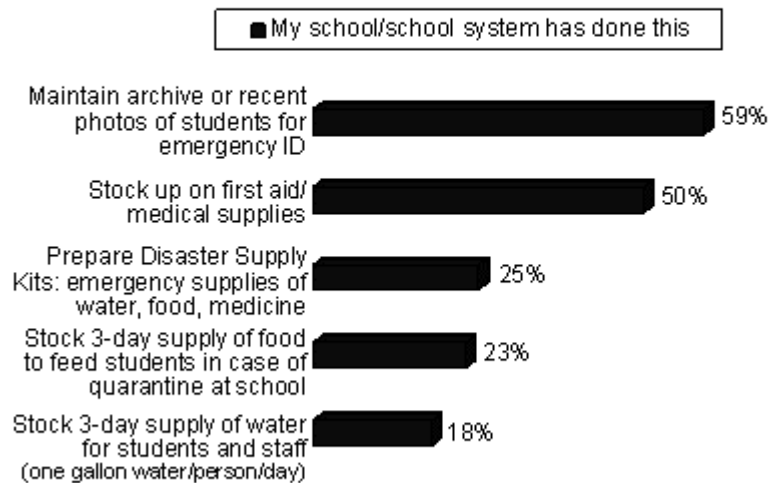
- For employers a major question is whether they will be able to maintain normal operations in the event of a public health crisis. This study reveals that many will struggle to do so. While 71% of employers report that they would encourage employees to stay home if a major flu outbreak affected their community, only 18% report that they would pay all their employees if their operations shut down for two months.
- On some fronts, school administrators have taken major steps toward preparing for a public health crisis, yet in certain key areas, as a group they are far from being fully equipped.
- 47% of school administrators have an emergency response plan that includes planning for a public health emergency. A large majority (84%) of school administrators have an evacuation plan in place, 73% have conducted staff training, and more than two-thirds (69%) have conducted drills with students to practice the school’s emergency preparedness plan.
- In other areas, schools have much to do to achieve full preparedness. Only one in ten school administrators has developed a student training manual that outlines the school’s preparedness plan and distributed that plan to all parents. Fewer than one-quarter (23%) have enough food on hand to feed their students for at least three days, and only 18% have enough water to provide a gallon a day for each student, for at least three days.

## **Self-Reported Preparedness: *Establishing Plans***



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## Self-Reported Preparedness: *Assembling Supplies*



School administrators are fairly prepared to take steps to curtail situations in their community that could worsen a public health crisis. In the event of a serious flu outbreak, two-thirds of the school administrators in the study (65%) would shut down for a period of time, 71% would encourage staff to stay home, and more than three-quarters (77%) would encourage students to stay home from school. Schools often become the central gathering location in the event of an emergency situation. A large majority (70%) of school administrators report that their school or school system is prepared to serve as a community shelter. Just under half could supply meals to students (48%) and address the health needs of students with chronic health conditions if sheltering them (46%). Nearly one-third (29%) could supply meals to the community if the food supply were interrupted.

To learn more about the preparedness planning and capacity to continue to provide services during a public health crisis, in-depth telephone interviews were conducted with five with food bank regional distribution center managers and four local food pantry and soup kitchen managers. The interviews found that 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 through America's Second Harvest and work in concert with organizations such as the Red Cross and the United Way, as well as state and federal government agencies. These regional distribution centers are part of national networks that have been established to respond to disasters and emergency situations. One regional distribution center included in this study recently built a new, state-of-the-art warehouse that has its own generator. It is capable of maintaining storage and distribution operations for an extended period should they it electricity.

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Local emergency food distribution centers, such as food banks, pantries, and soup kitchens that provide direct assistance to individuals and families, were largely unaware of the efforts involving the warehouse distribution centers that serve them and largely unprepared for an emergency situation, such as a public health crisis. In fact, none of the local food distribution centers had disaster response plans in place, none had plans to develop emergency response plans, and not one was connected to local, state, or national disaster response planning efforts. Although all the local food distribution centers expected to do whatever they could to help during an emergency, most of them doubted they could keep their own operation going in an emergency. The local food distributors' financial constraints, lack of expertise, and the fact that they rely heavily on volunteer staffing are the major barriers to becoming more prepared.

### **Barriers to Preparedness**

Subgroups of the general public as well as employers and particularly school administrators identify cost of becoming prepared as the greatest barrier to preparedness.

- Individuals with higher incomes are less likely to cite cost as a barrier and are more likely to report that they are very or fairly prepared for a public health crisis.
- While 78% of employers indicate they have the financial resources to prepare, even though for some it would require shifting resources, 59% say that cost is at least a minor barrier to being more prepared.
- Nearly half (41%) of employers believe that developing a comprehensive preparedness plan involves substantial or major financial resources and 39% believe that developing such a plan involves a substantial or major investment of managerial and staff time.
- Cost clearly is the most significant barrier for school administrators. Forty percent (40%) believe that they do not have the financial resources to prepare a plan and stockpile resources and nearly two-thirds report that developing a comprehensive plan will entail a substantial or major investment of financial resources and managerial and staff time.
- Providing easily accessible, user-friendly information about steps to take to become prepared as well as the cost and time associated with completing those steps will help address financial and time concerns, barriers related to thinking that a public health crisis is very unlikely to occur or simply not thinking about it at all, and lack of knowledge about what to do to become prepared.

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<b>Potential Preparedness Barrier</b>	<b>Finding</b>
Do not think a public health crisis is likely	<b>58%</b> of the public, <b>48%</b> of employers, and <b>30%</b> of school administrators cite this as a minor or major reason for not preparing
Believe they are already prepared.	<b>27%</b> of the public views themselves as very well prepared or fairly well prepared, but just half ( <b>13%</b> ) meet the three-day standard.
Do not know what to do to prepare	<b>44%</b> of the public, <b>41%</b> of employers, and <b>25%</b> of school administrators cite this as a minor or major reason
Do not have the time	<b>37%</b> of the public, 42% of employers, and <b>32%</b> of school administrators cite this as a minor or major reason
Do not have the money	<b>62%</b> of the public cite this as a minor or major reason

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