

Most Americans Think Devastating Natural Disasters Are Increasing

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Less than half believe in global warming

Reading or watching the news, one might be struck by the seemingly constant barrage of reports of disasters, both natural in origin and not.

In fact, some colleges and universities have begun offering coursework in emergency and disaster management, as these impactful and unplanned events continue to shape our world. When Americans were asked if they think that there have been more devastating natural disasters, including hurricanes, tornados and earthquakes recently, three quarters of U.S. adults say there have been more (76%) with three in ten saying there have been much more (31%); only 2% say there have been less and 23% say there have been neither more nor less.

These are some of the results of The Harris Poll of 2,163 adults surveyed online between June 13 and 20, 2011 by Harris Interactive.

Despite a large majority reporting an increase in devastating disasters, only 56% say they are prepared for one of these disasters or a long-term power outage by having the necessary supplies, food and water for three days.

Conversely two in five Americans say they are not prepared in this way (41%), although older Americans overall are better prepared than those younger: two thirds of Matures, aged 66 years and older, say they are prepared for a disaster or long-term power outage (67%), compared to 59% of Baby Boomers, aged 47-65, 54% of Gen X, aged 35-46 and fewer than half of Echo Boomers, aged 18-34 (45%).

Types of Disasters and Government Readiness

Americans are concerned about different disasters, particularly depending on where they live. While half of Americans say they think a tornado (52%) or a snow and/or ice storm (48%) will impact them, the numbers vary greatly by region. Some regional concerns are:

- Easterners think that a snow and/or ice storm will be most likely to directly impact them (77%) and while Midwesterners are concerned about this as well (79%), an even greater number say they believe tornados will impact them (89%);

- Southerners are also concerned about tornados (66%) yet half say they are concerned about hurricanes (54%) or droughts (50%);

- Those in the West believe earthquakes will impact them (66%), which is a concern shared by very few in all other regions (between 7% and 16%);

- Although only 11% of Americans think a nuclear power plant disaster or meltdown will affect them directly, it is the only issue listed that most people say the federal government is worst equipped to handle (59%). One third say the government is worst equipped to handle terrorism (34%), which is down from the 48% who said this in 2006; and,

- In 2006, shortly after Hurricane Katrina, half of Americans (50%) said that the federal government was worst equipped to handle hurricanes. Five years later just 16% believe this.

Information about emergencies

Half of Americans say they are most likely to get information about emergencies on television (51%) while fewer than one in five say they get information from the radio (18%). Just over one in ten get information about emergencies from online news sites (13%) and significantly fewer get information from other people (4%), Facebook (3%), text messages (2%), newspapers (2%), Twitter (1%) or something else (1%).

Different generations access information about emergencies differently: the older one is the more likely they are to get their information on TV, while the younger one is the more likely they are to get information from an online source (a news site, Facebook or Twitter).

Global Warming

Asked this month, the Harris Poll finds the lowest number who believe in global warming since the question was first asked in 1997 (44% now do, down from 51% in 2009 and 71% in 2007). These numbers do not suggest, however, that a majority now do not believe in global warming-just over one-quarter say they do not believe in it (28%) and the same number say they are not sure. Fittingly, among those who say there have been more natural disasters recently, there is no consensus whether this is a result of global warming or not (38% say it is, 28% say it's not and 34% are not sure).

So What?

The world around us is changing-disasters seem to strike more frequently than before and individually each one seems more impactful in nature. What Americans today seem unsure of, however, is how to prepare for these unexpected events, and what is causing them. Luckily with today's confluence of research, experience and modern day technology for communication, while we may not be able to stop natural-born disasters, we may be able to work together to significantly limit their tragic results.

Methodology

This Harris Poll was conducted online within the United States between June 13 to 20, 2011 among 2,163 adults (aged 18 and over). Figures for age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, region and household income were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population. Propensity score weighting was also used to adjust for respondents' propensity to be online.

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including sampling error, coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments.

Therefore, Harris Interactive avoids the words "margin of error" as they are misleading. All that can be calculated are different possible sampling errors with different probabilities for pure, unweighted, random samples with 100% response rates. These are only theoretical because no published polls come close to this ideal.

Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in Harris Interactive surveys. The data have been weighted to reflect the composition of the adult population. Because the sample is based on those who agreed to participate in the Harris Interactive panel, no estimates of theoretical sampling error can be calculated.

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