



**Personal Preparedness in America:  
Findings from the Citizen Corps National Survey  
June 2009  
- Summary Sheet -**

**Purpose of Survey:** To evaluate the nation’s progress on personal preparedness and to measure the public’s knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors relative to preparing for a range of hazards.

**Research Conducted by:** FEMA’s Community Preparedness Division and Citizen Corps

**Sampling:** 2,400 U.S. households

**Research Questions:**

- To what extent are individuals prepared for disasters? What barriers do individuals perceive in preparing for disasters?
- What is the perception of vulnerability to different types of disasters? How do people perceive the utility of preparedness?
- In which stage of the Stages of Change Model (Precontemplation, Contemplation, Preparation, Action, Maintenance) are individuals relative to disaster preparedness?
- How does disaster preparedness differ by demographic characteristics?
- How do the findings inform the Citizen Corps PDP Model?
- What is the perceived social responsibility for reporting suspicious behavior?
- How aware are individuals of specific Federally sponsored community preparedness programs, and what are their communication preferences about these programs?

**Key Findings:**

- 53% of respondents have supplies set aside at home
- 42% of respondents have a household disaster plan
- Too many Americans don’t know how to get critical information or where to go in the event of a disaster.
  - 60% of respondents were unfamiliar about their local evacuation routes
  - 54% of respondents were unfamiliar with their local shelter locations
- The type of disaster makes a difference to an individuals’ perceived ability to respond.
  - Individuals felt the most confident in their ability to respond in the first minutes of a natural and least confident in their ability in the event of an explosion of a radiological or dirty bomb.
- 71% of respondents expect to rely heavily on household members and 57% expect to rely on fire, police or emergency personnel in the first 72 hours following a disaster.
- Only 37% of respondents think a natural disaster will ever affect their community, less than 1 in 5 for an act of terrorism.
- 37% of respondents reported that a primary reason for not preparing is that they believe emergency responders will help them.

- Few respondents believe they can handle situations without preparation.
  - 78% of respondents believe preparation, planning, and emergency supplies will help them handle a natural disaster.
  - However, almost 4 in 10 felt preparations would not make a difference.
- 32% of respondents reported being prepared for at least the past 6 months, while 27% are not planning to do anything about preparing.

**Summary and Recommendations:** The following recommendations are intended to assist researchers and practitioners in increasing personal preparedness, civic engagement, and community resilience.

- An awareness of vulnerabilities to natural disasters motivates individuals to prepare. Most individuals, however, did not believe their communities will ever be affected by any type of disaster.
- Perceptions of the utility of preparedness and confidence in ability to respond varied significantly by type of hazard. Because all hazards messaging may dilute critical differences in preparedness and response protocols, preparedness and response education should include a focus on hazard-specific actions appropriate for each community.
- Individuals' high expectations of assistance from emergency responders may inhibit individual preparedness. Communicating more realistic expectations and personal responsibilities is critical.
- Social networks, such as households, neighborhoods, the workplace, schools, and faith communities, and the concepts of mutual support should be emphasized.
- Too few people had stocked disaster supplies, and most supplies were incomplete. More emphasis is needed on the importance of stocking disaster supplies in multiple locations, and more specificity is needed on critical items to include, such as flashlights, radios, batteries, first aid kits, and personal documents.
- Greater appreciation for the importance of household plans and knowledge of local emergency community procedures and response resources is needed. Individuals who reported being prepared lacked critical plans and information.
- Practicing response protocols is critical for effective execution. Greater emphasis on drills and exercises is needed.
- Focusing on individuals in the contemplation stage for personal preparedness may yield greater results. Messaging and community outreach efforts should be designed to support those already considering taking action.
- Individuals' strong interest in attending training courses and volunteering should be harnessed through social networks. Training and volunteer service should be linked with a responsibility for educating and encouraging others to prepare.
- Specific socio-demographic characteristics correlated with attitudes toward and actions for preparedness. Insights into these differences offer the ability to tailor outreach efforts to targeted audiences.
- Residents in urban areas appeared to be least engaged in preparedness activities. With the added vulnerabilities of dense population centers, urban areas should be a targeted focus of preparedness outreach efforts.
- Individuals believed they had a personal responsibility to report suspicious behavior, but greater collaboration between citizens and law enforcement is needed.

**Conclusion and Next Steps:**

- Findings from this study have important implications for the development of more effective communication and outreach strategies to achieve greater levels of preparedness and participation.

- While the Federal government and national leaders must continue to emphasize the importance of preparedness from a national platform, it is clear that effective strategies for preparedness must be implemented at the community level and through social networks. DHS and FEMA national policy and guidelines issued since September 11, 2001 have recognized the importance of government collaboration with non-government sectors and the importance of supporting grassroots efforts such as Citizen Corps.
- In addition to repeating the Citizen Corps National Survey periodically to track changes in preparedness and shifts in attitudes and behavior, there are many other areas of needed research to understand more fully the complexities of motivating and sustaining personal preparedness and participation. Areas for future research include:
  - An exploration of different perceptions of hazard types and how perception affects preparedness, to include terminology such as “disaster,” “terrorism,” “pandemic flu,” and “preparedness.”
  - A clearer assessment of the most critical knowledge, skills, and supplies needed for effective personal response, to include an examination of survivor and non-survivor behavior in actual events. Understanding response will, in turn, inform appropriate areas of emphasis for preparedness training and education.
  - How socio-demographic factors relate to preparedness and how outreach strategies should be tailored to achieve the greatest impact for targeted audiences.
  - Qualitative research such as focus groups or interviews to explore more fully how individuals understand the issues of threat, self-efficacy, and response-efficacy and to explore internal and external barriers and motivators to preparedness.
  - Testing specific messages, spokespersons, and social marketing strategies that will have greater impact on individuals’ understanding of their role in preparedness and willingness to engage in preparedness activities, to include targeted audiences from sociodemographics segments and from the Stages of Change Model.
  - An exploration of better ways to deliver training and to practice response skills through multiple and varied types of exercises.
  - How social networks such as neighborhoods, the workplace, schools, and faith communities can be better used to institutionalize preparedness information, training, and drills, and how civic leaders from these sectors can be more fully engaged in government-led community resilience efforts.
- Civic engagement and personal responsibility are rooted in the founding ideology of our nation, and these principles have deep and abiding implications for our continued national resilience. Comprehensive assessment of personal preparedness in America must be multi-faceted, adaptive, and enduring. It requires investment and leadership from all sectors. In the end, it is the toll on human life and on our way of life that makes resilience such a crucial endeavor. We must work together to strengthen social capital, we must learn from each other and learn to help each other, and we must continue to pursue a culture of preparedness through the active participation of all.