PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF THE HEALTH CONSEQUENCES OF GLOBAL WARMING

OCTOBER 2014

YALE PROJECT ON CLIMATE CHANGE COMMUNICATION
BRIDGING SCIENCE + SOCIETY

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Introduction

This report is based on findings from a nationally representative survey – *Climate Change in the American Mind* – conducted by the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication (http://environment.yale.edu/climate-communication) and the George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication (http://www.climatechangecommunication.org). Interview dates: October 17-28, 2014. Interviews: 1,275 Adults (18+). Average margin of error: +/- 3 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. The research was funded by the 11th Hour Project, the Energy Foundation, the Grantham Foundation, the V.K. Rasmussen Foundation, and the National Science Foundation [Award # DRL-1422431].

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Key Findings

- Few Americans have thought much about the health consequences of global warming. Asked how often, if at all, *before taking this survey* they had thought about how global warming might affect people's health, six in 10 said they had given the issue little or no thought. Only one in 10 said they had given the issue a "great deal" of thought and only about two in 10 (22%) said they had thought about it a "moderate amount."

- Few Americans are aware of any current health consequences of global warming. When asked "In your view, what health problems related to global warming are Americans experiencing, if any?" a majority either didn't answer the question (43%) – which likely indicates they didn't have an answer – or answered that they "don't know" (14%). Only one in four (27%) named at least one health problem related to global warming, and 10% answered, incorrectly, that there are *no* health problems associated with global warming.

- Moreover, with the exception of respiratory problems including asthma and other lung diseases (14%) and illness, injury, and death caused by extreme weather (6%), 5% or fewer Americans identified any of the other health consequences of global warming.

- When asked "Do you think some groups or types of Americans are more likely than other Americans to experience health problems related to global warming?" only one in three Americans (33%) answered, correctly, that some groups of Americans are more likely than others to have their health harmed by global warming; most survey participants are either "not sure" (43%) or said no group is at higher risk (23%).[1]

- Only one in three Americans (31%) thinks global warming is currently harming the health of people in the U.S. a "great deal" or a "moderate amount," while one in six thinks their own health (17%) or the health of others in their household (17%) is being harmed to that degree.

- Four in ten Americans (39%) think global warming will harm the health of people in the U.S. a "moderate amount" or "great deal" over the next five to 10 years, while nearly three in ten think their own health (27%) or the health of others in their household (28%) will be harmed over this time period.

- When asked if specific health problems will become more or less common over the next 10 years in their community due to global warming, more than one third of Americans think the following conditions will become more common: air pollution, including smog (38%); pollen-related allergies (38%); asthma/other lung diseases (37%); heat stroke (36%); and bodily harm from severe storms and/or hurricanes (34%).

[1] These findings are based primarily on respondents' answers to open-ended questions, which require people to generate their own answers from memory. The results strongly suggest that most Americans know little to nothing about the public health risks associated with climate change. Conversely, the next three key findings are based on closed-ended questions in which respondents are asked to select from already provided answers, and are thus prone to choosing an opinion on the spot. These results suggest a somewhat greater level of concern about the health consequences of global warming.

- Few Americans are aware of the current or projected future health impacts of global warming worldwide. A plurality of Americans say they are not sure how many people worldwide are currently injured, made ill, or die each year – or will each year 50 years from now – as a result of global warming. Many others (21% to 33%) think no people will suffer health consequences from global warming, either now or in the future.

- By contrast, only 12 to 15 percent of Americans think that thousands or millions of people worldwide currently die or are sickened or injured due to global warming, and only 25 to 28 percent think that thousands or millions will die, be injured or made ill each year 50 years from now due to global warming.

- When asked whether certain government agencies or branches should do more or less to protect people from global warming-related health problems, nearly half of Americans think the following should do more: federal agencies such as the CDC, NIH, or FEMA (47%); the U.S. Congress (46%); and their state government (44%)

- While more Americans support rather than oppose funding increases for government agencies to protect the public from health problems related to global warming, many Americans – approximately three in ten – have no opinion on this matter.

- When asked whether they trust or distrust various sources of information about health problems related to global warming, Americans are most likely to say they trust: their primary-care doctor (49% trust him or her "strongly" or "moderately"); family/friends (41%); the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (41%); climate scientists (40%); and the American Medical Association (40%). By contrast, Americans are least likely to trust religious leaders and U.S. military leaders on this subject.

Preface

The third National Climate Assessment[2] – released in May 2014 – reached four major conclusions about the effects of climate change on the health of Americans. Those conclusions were:

1. Climate change threatens human health and well-being in many ways, including impacts from extreme weather events, wildfire, decreased air quality, threats to mental health, and illnesses transmitted by food, water, and disease carriers such as mosquitoes and ticks. Some of these health impacts are already underway in the United States.

2. Climate change will – absent other changes – amplify some of the existing health threats the nation now faces. Certain people and communities are especially vulnerable, including children, the elderly, the sick, the poor, and some communities of color.

3. Public health actions, especially preparedness and prevention, can do much to protect people from some of the impacts of climate change. Early action provides the largest health benefits. As threats increase, our ability to adapt to future changes may be limited.

4. Responding to climate change provides opportunities to improve human health and well-being across many sectors, including energy, agriculture, and transportation. Many of these strategies offer a variety of benefits, protecting people while combating climate change and providing other societal benefits.

The survey results reported here assess public awareness and understanding of these conclusions; public preference for government actions intended to help protect Americans' health from the consequences of climate change; and public trust in various sources of information.

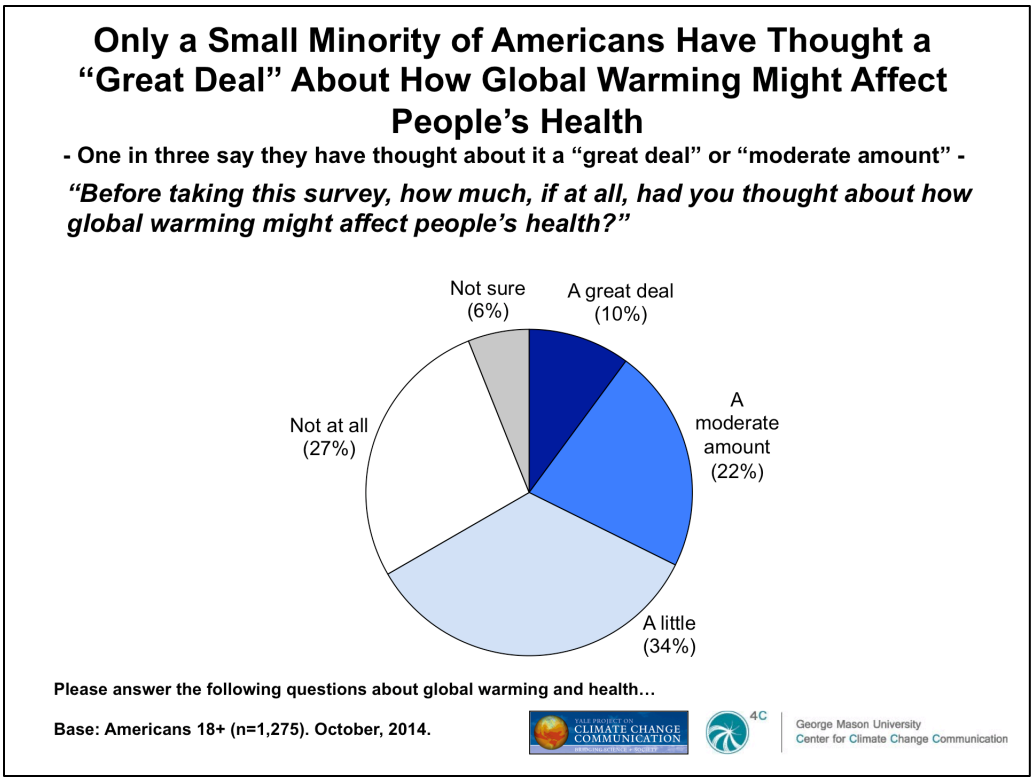
[2] http://nca2014.globalchange.gov/report

1. American Perceptions of the Health Consequences of Global Warming

1.1. Only a small minority of Americans have thought a "great deal" about how global warming might affect people's health; one in three say they have thought about it a "great deal" or "moderate amount."

Asked how often, if ever, *before taking this survey* they had thought about how global warming might affect people's health[3]:

- Only one in 10 Americans said they had given the issue a "great deal" of thought
- Only about two in 10 (22%) said they had thought about it a "moderate amount"
- Six in 10 (61%) said they had given the issue little or no thought.



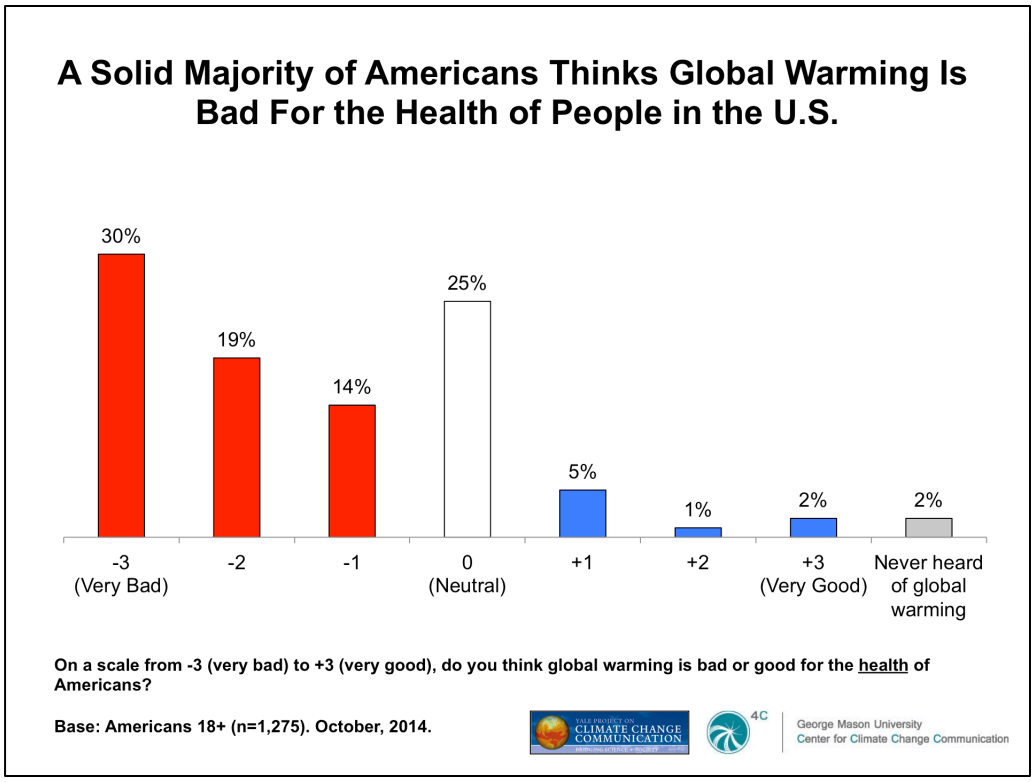
[3]This question was asked at the end of a lengthy set of questions about climate and health and may therefore over-estimate how much people had previously thought about the issue.

1.2. A solid majority of Americans thinks global warming is bad for the health of people in the U.S…

One of the most useful ways to assess people's opinions about issues they haven't thought much about is to begin with a broad question that provides context. To that end, we began our questions about climate and health with the following item: "On a scale from -3 (very bad) to +3 (very good), do you think global warming is bad or good for the health of Americans?"

We found that a solid majority of Americans (63%) thinks global warming is bad for the health of people in the U.S., with three in ten (30%) saying it is *very* bad.

By contrast, few people think global warming is good for the health of Americans (8%).



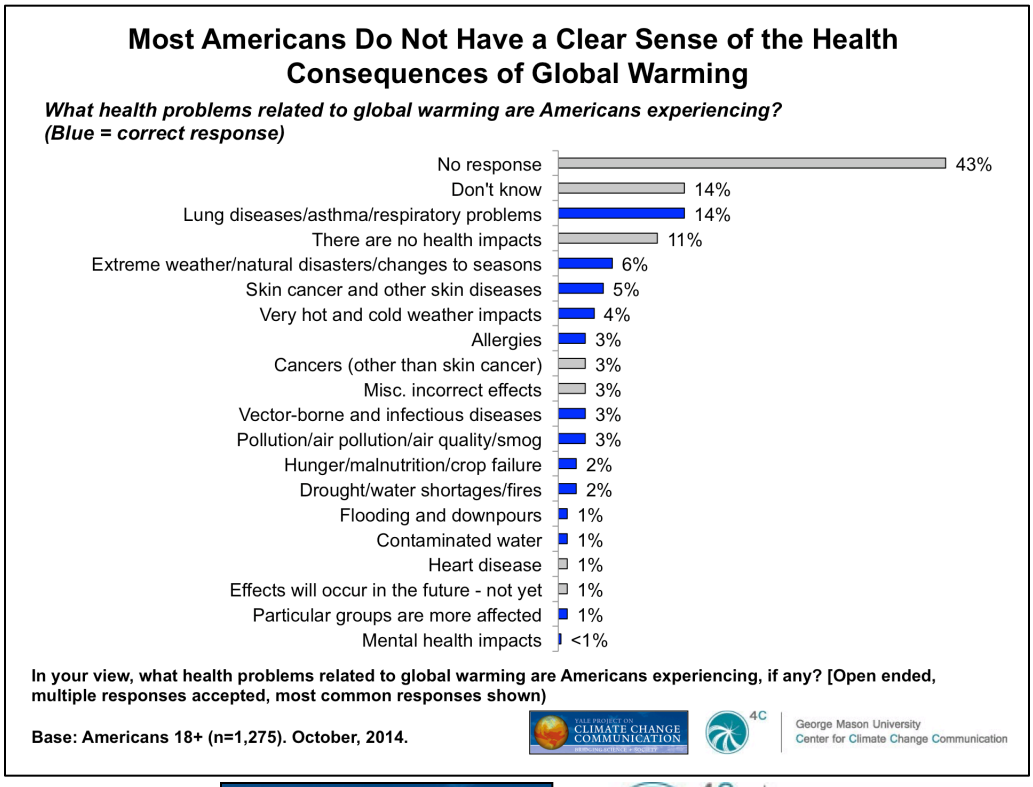
1.3. …But most Americans do not have a clear sense of the ways in which it is harmful.

We next asked an open-ended question to assess the extent to which Americans are aware of the potential health consequences of global warming: "In your view, what health problems related to global warming are Americans experiencing, if any?"

A majority of respondents either didn't answer the question (43%) – which likely indicates they didn't have an answer – or answered that they don't know (14%). One in 10 (11%) answered, incorrectly, that there are no health problems associated with global warming.

About one in four Americans (27%) identified at least one specific kind of harm. Each of the broad categories of health problems identified in the National Climate Assessment was mentioned by at least some survey respondents. However, with the exception of respiratory problems including asthma and other lung diseases (14%) and illness, injury, and death caused by extreme weather (6%), 5% or fewer Americans identified any of the other potential health consequences of global warming, including:

- Skin cancer and other skin diseases (5%)
- Problems associated with very hot and very cold weather (4%)
- Allergies (3%)
- Vector-borne and infectious diseases (3%)
- Air pollution (3%)
- Hunger, nutrition, and crop failure (2%)
- Problems associated with drought, water shortages, and fire (2%)
- Problems associated with flooding and downpours (1%)
- Contaminated water (1%)
- Mental health problems (<1%)



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1.4. Few Americans are aware that some groups are more vulnerable than others to global warming-related health problems.

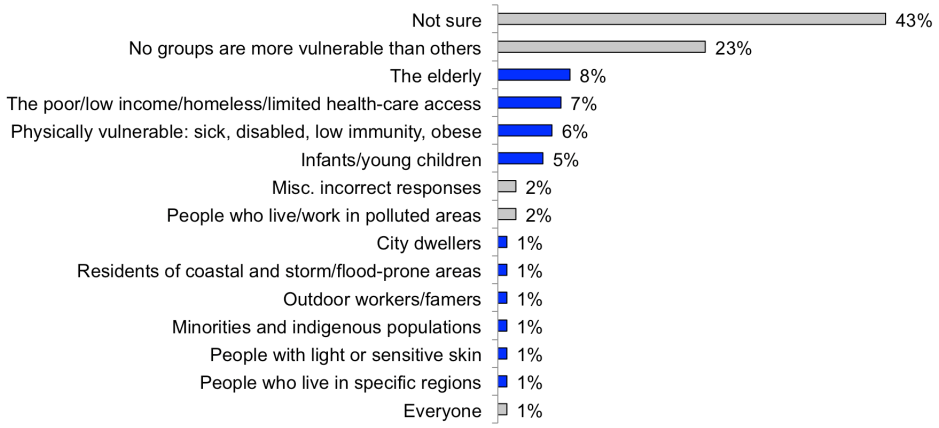
We next asked: "Do you think some groups or types of Americans are more likely than other Americans to experience health problems related to global warming?" Only one in three (33%) correctly understands that some groups of Americans are more likely than others to have their health harmed by global warming, while most survey participants are either "not sure" (43%) or say no group is at higher risk (23%).

Respondents who correctly answered that some types of Americans are more likely than others to experience health problems from global warming were then asked: "Which groups or types of Americans do you think are more likely than other Americans to experience health problems related to global warming?"

In total, relatively few Americans know that the elderly (8%), the poor (7%), people with illnesses or health conditions (6%), children (5%), and certain communities of color (1%) are more likely than Americans in general to experience health problems caused by global warming.

Few Americans Are Aware of the Groups That Are More Vulnerable to Global Warming-Related Health Problems

Which groups or types of Americans do you think are more likely than other Americans to experience health problems related to global warming?
(Blue = correct response)



Do you think that some groups or types of Americans are more likely than other Americans to experience health problems related to global warming? (If "Yes:") Which groups or types of Americans do you think are more likely than other Americans to experience health problems related to global warming? [Open ended, multiple responses accepted, most common responses shown)

Base: Americans 18+ (n=1,275). October, 2014.

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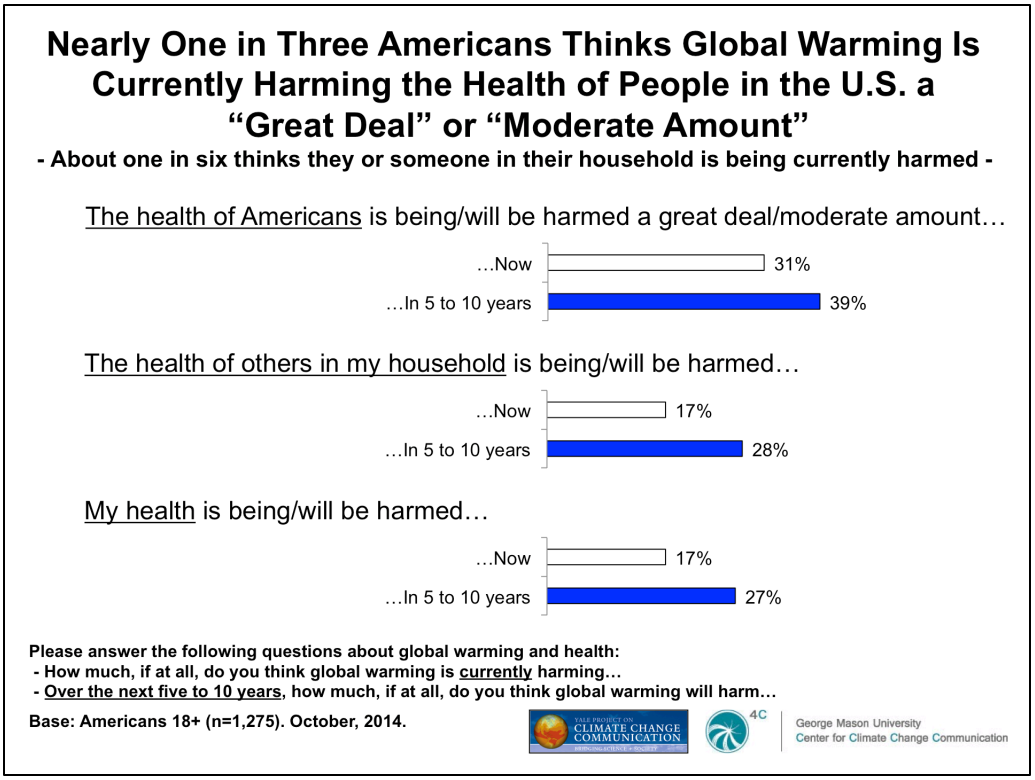
1.5. Nearly one in three Americans thinks global warming is currently harming the health of people in the U.S. a "great deal" or "moderate amount." About one in six thinks they or someone in their household is currently being harmed.

Nearly one in three Americans (31%) think global warming is currently harming the health of people in the U.S. a "great deal" or a "moderate amount," though slightly fewer (27%) can name any specific type of harm. Only about one in six thinks their own health (17%) or the health of others in their household (17%) is being harmed a "great deal" or a "moderate amount."

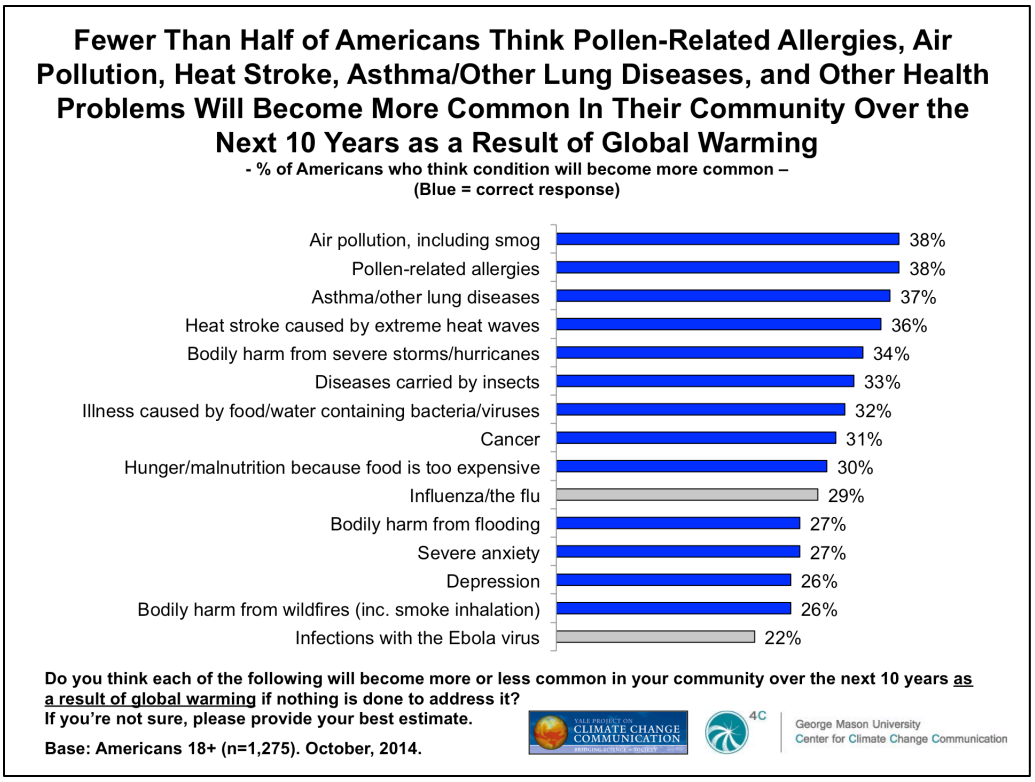
Four in ten Americans (39%) think global warming will harm the health of people in the U.S. a "moderate amount" or "great deal" over the next five to 10 years. About three in ten think their own health (27%) or the health of others in their household (28%) will be harmed in the same time period.



1.5. Fewer than half of Americans think pollen-related allergies, air pollution, heat stroke, asthma/other lung diseases, and other health problems will become more common in their community over the next 10 years as a result of global warming.

When asked whether a number of health problems will become more or less common over the next 10 years in their community due to global warming, fewer than half of Americans think the following, among other conditions, will become more common:

- Air pollution, including smog (38% more common)
- Pollen-related allergies (38%)
- Asthma/other lung diseases (37%)
- Heat stroke (36%)
- Bodily harm from severe storms and/or hurricanes (34%)

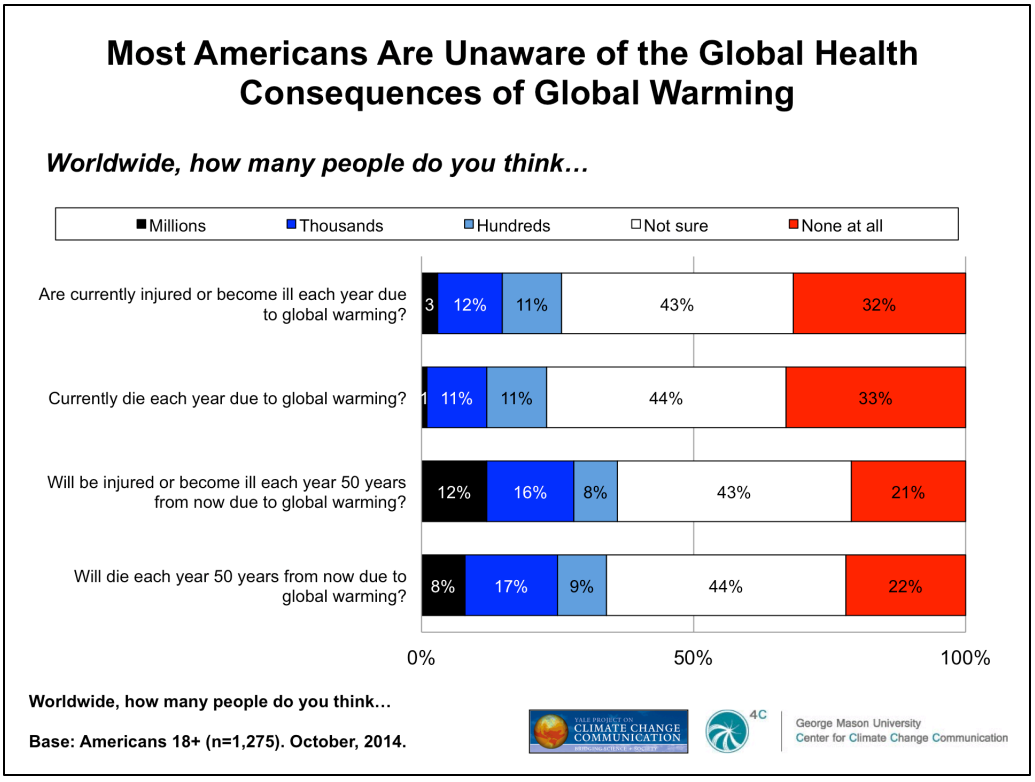


1.6. Most Americans are unaware of the global health consequences of global warming.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has estimated that currently, approximately 150,000 people worldwide die prematurely each year as a result of climate change, and this number is projected to rise to 250,000 premature deaths per year between 2030 and 2050. WHO is not yet able to estimate the number of injuries and illnesses worldwide from global warming, but experts are certain that the number of injuries and illnesses far exceed the number of deaths.

A plurality of Americans say they are not sure how many people worldwide are currently injured, made ill, or die each year – or will each year 50 years from now – as a result of global warming. Many others (21% to 33%) think no people will suffer health consequences from global warming, either now or in the future.

By contrast, few Americans think that thousands or millions of people worldwide currently die (12%) or are sickened or injured (15%) due to global warming. More Americans understand that the worldwide health toll of global warming will be greater in the future. But still, only about one in four thinks that thousands or millions will die (25%) or be injured or made ill (28%) each year 50 years from now due to global warming.



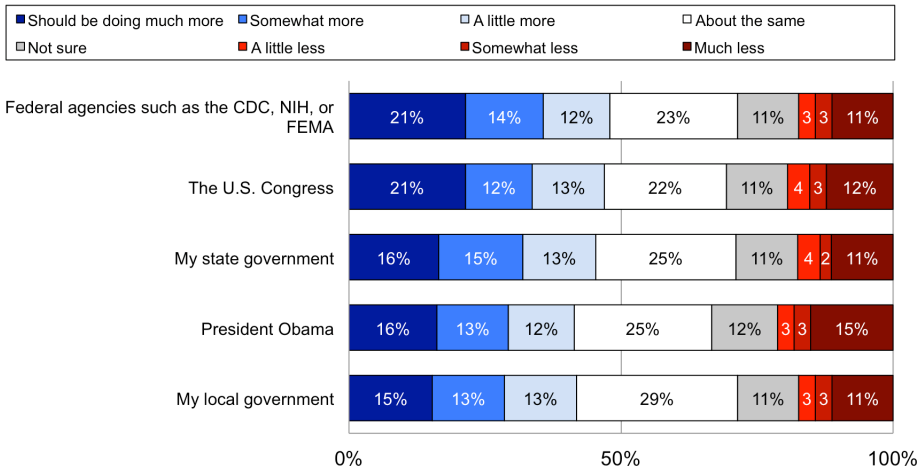
2. The Government's Role in Protecting People From the Health Consequences of Global Warming

2.1. Many Americans think federal, state, and local governments should be doing more to protect people from global warming-related health problems.

When asked whether certain government agencies or branches should do more or less to protect people from global warming-related health problems, nearly half of Americans think the following should do more:

- Federal agencies such as the CDC, NIH, or FEMA (47% of Americans say they should do "much," "somewhat," or "a little" more than they are doing now)
- The U.S. Congress (46%)
- My state government (44%)

Many Americans Think Federal, State, and Local Governments Should Be Doing More to Protect People From Global Warming-Related Health Problems



In your opinion, should each of the following be doing more, less, or about the same amount as they are doing now to protect people from health problems related to global warming?

Base: Americans 18+ (n=1,275). October, 2014.

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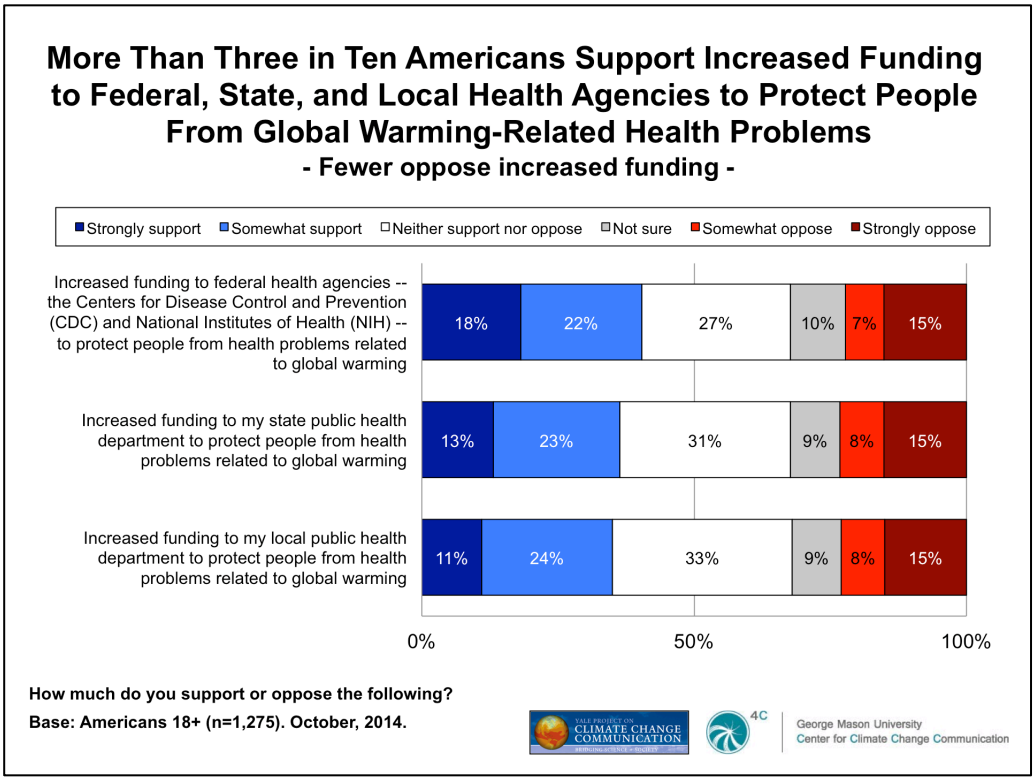
2.2. More than three in ten Americans support increased funding to federal, state, and local health agencies to protect people from global warming-related health problems. Fewer oppose increased funding.

Many Americans think government agencies should receive increased funding to protect people from health problems related to global warming, including:

- Federal health agencies such as the CDC and NIH (40% support increasing funding, 22% oppose it)
- My state public health department (36% support, 23% oppose)
- My local public health department (35% support, 23% oppose)

While more Americans support rather than oppose funding increases for government agencies to protect the public from health problems related to global warming, the largest group of Americans – approximately three in ten – has no opinion on this matter.



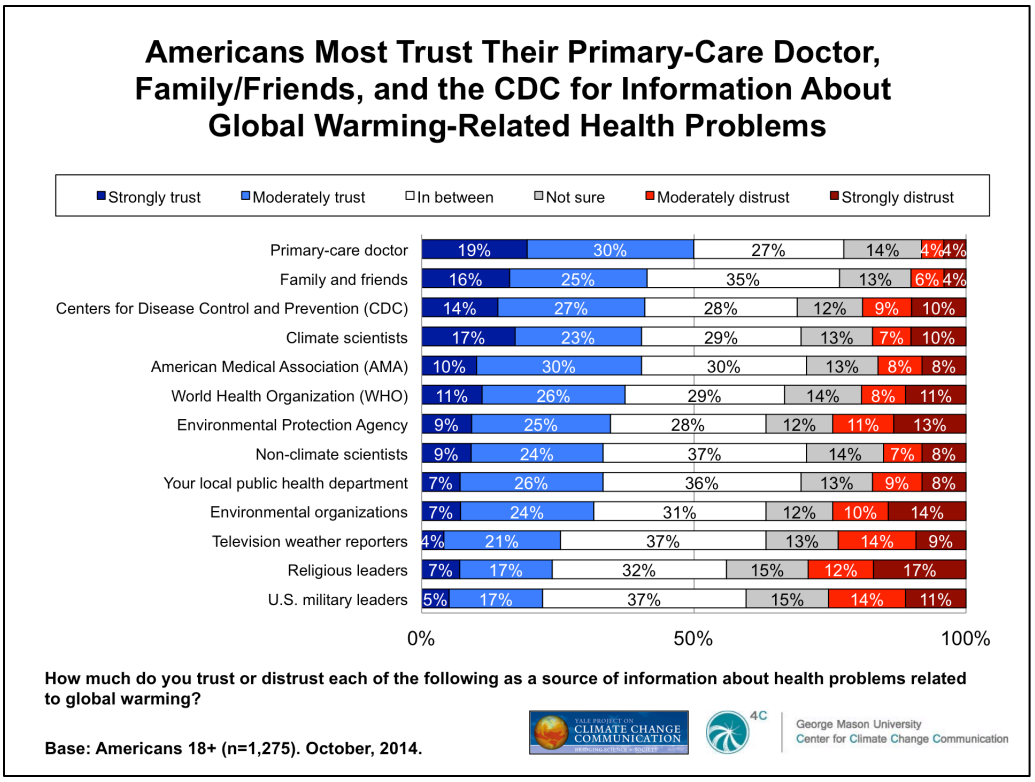
3. Trusted Sources of Information About the Health Consequences of Global Warming

3.1. Americans most trust their primary-care doctor, family/friends, and the C.D.C. for information about global warming-related health problems.

When asked whether they trust or distrust various sources of information about health problems related to global warming, Americans are most likely to say they trust:

- Their primary-care doctor (49% trust him or her "strongly" or "moderately")
- Family and friends (41%)
- The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (41%)
- Climate scientists (40%)
- The American Medical Association (40%)

By contrast, Americans are more likely to distrust than trust religious leaders and U.S. military leaders on this subject.



Appendix I: Data Tables of Questions Cited in the Report

(Base: Americans 18+, n=1,275)
Please answer the following questions about global warming and health…

	A great deal	A moderate amount	A little	Not at all	Not sure
	%	%	%	%	%
Before taking this survey, how much, if at all, had you thought about how global warming might affect people's health?	10	22	34	27	6
Before taking this survey, how much, if at all, did you worry about how global warming might affect people's health?	6	19	29	39	6

(Base: Americans 18+)
On a scale from -3 (very bad) to +3 (very good), do you think global warming is bad or good for the health of Americans?

	Total
(Unweighted base)	(1,275)
	%
-3 (Very bad)	30
-2	19
-1	14
0	25
+1	5
+2	1
+3 (Very good)	2
Never heard of global warming	2

(Base: Americans 18+)
In your view, what health problems related to global warming are Americans experiencing, if any? [Open ended, multiple responses accepted, most common responses)

	Total
(Unweighted base)	(1,275)
	%
No response	43
Lung diseases/asthma/respiratory problems	14
Don't know	14
There are no health impacts	11
Extreme weather/natural disasters/changes to seasons	6
Skin cancer and other skin diseases	5
Very hot and cold weather impacts	4
Pollution/air pollution/air quality/smog	3
Vector-borne and infectious diseases	3
Misc. incorrect effects	3
Cancers (other than skin cancer)	3
Allergies	3
Drought/water shortages/fires	2
Hunger/nutrition/crop failure	2
Particular groups are more affected	1
Effects will occur in the future - not yet	1
Heart disease	1
Contaminated water	1
Flooding and downpours	1
Mental health impacts	<1

(Base: Americans 18+, n=1,275)
Please answer the following questions about global warming and health: How much, if at all, do you think global warming is currently harming…

	A great deal	A moderate amount	Only a little	Not at all	Not sure
	%	%	%	%	%
The health of Americans	8	23	26	28	14
Your health	4	13	25	45	12
The health of other people living in your household	4	13	23	46	13

(Base: Americans 18+, n=1,275)
Please answer the following questions about global warming and health: Over the next five to 10 years, how much, if at all, do you think global warming will harm…

	A great deal	A moderate amount	Only a little	Not at all	Not sure
	%	%	%	%	%
The health of Americans	13	26	20	24	16
The health of other people living in your household	7	21	21	35	15
Your health	6	21	23	33	15

(Base: Americans 18+, n=1,275)
Worldwide, how many people do you think…

	Millions	Thousands	Hundreds	None	Don't know
	%	%	%	%	%
Will be injured or become ill each year 50 years from now due to global warming	12	16	8	21	43
Will die each year 50 years from now due to global warming	8	17	9	22	44
Are currently injured or become ill each year due to global warming	3	12	11	32	43
Currently die each year due to global warming	1	11	11	33	44

(Base: Americans 18+, n=1,275)
Do you think each of the following will become more or less common in your community over the next 10 years as a result of global warming if nothing is done to address it? If you're not sure, please provide your best estimate.

	Much more common	Some-what more common	A little more common	Will stay about the same	A little less common	Some-what less common	Much less common
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Air pollution (including smog)	8	10	20	44	4	4	8
Pollen-related allergies	7	11	20	45	4	3	7
Asthma and/or other lung diseases	6	11	20	45	4	4	8
Bodily harm from severe storms and/or hurricanes	5	9	20	45	5	5	8
Cancer	5	9	17	52	4	3	7
Illness caused by food and/or water containing harmful bacteria or viruses	5	7	20	48	5	4	8
Influenza (the flu)	5	7	17	55	4	4	6
Severe anxiety	5	6	16	54	4	4	8
Heat stroke caused by extreme heat waves	4	9	23	45	3	4	8
Diseases carried by insects, such as Lyme disease, West Nile virus, and/or dengue fever	4	8	21	48	4	4	8
Depression	4	7	15	53	4	4	8
Hunger or malnutrition because food is too expensive	4	7	19	48	5	5	10
Bodily harm from flooding	4	6	17	50	5	5	10
Bodily harm from wildfires (including from smoke inhalation)	4	6	16	51	6	5	9
Infections with the Ebola virus	3	5	14	50	6	7	12

(Base: Americans 18+)
Do you think that some groups or types of Americans are more likely than other Americans to experience health problems related to global warming?

	Total
(Unweighted base)	(1,275)
	%
Yes	33
No	23
Not sure	43

(Base: Americans 18+)
Which groups or types of Americans do you think are more likely than other Americans to experience health problems related to global warming? (Open ended, multiple responses accepted, most common responses)

	Total
(Unweighted base)	(1,275)
	%
Not sure	43
No groups are more vulnerable than others	23
The elderly	8
The poor/low income/homeless/limited health-care access	7
Sick, disabled, low immunity, obese	6
Infants/young children	5
People who live/work in polluted areas	2
Misc. incorrect responses	2
People who live in specific regions	1
People with light or sensitive skin	1
Minorities and indigenous populations	1
Outdoor workers/famers	1
Residents of coastal and storm/flood-prone areas	1
City dwellers	1
Everyone	1

(Base: Americans 18+, n=1,275)
In your opinion, should each of the following be doing more, less, or about the same amount as they are doing now to protect people from health problems related to global warming?

	Much more	Some-what more	A little more	About the same	A little less	Some-what less	Much less	Not sure
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Federal agencies -- such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)	21	14	12	23	3	3	11	11
The U.S. Congress	21	12	13	22	4	3	12	11
Your state government	16	15	13	25	4	2	11	11
President Obama	16	13	12	25	3	3	15	12
Your local government	15	13	13	29	3	3	11	11

(Base: Americans 18+, n=1,275)
How much do you support or oppose the following?

	Strongly support	Some-what support	Neither support nor oppose	Some-what oppose	Strongly oppose	Not sure
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Increased funding to federal health agencies -- the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and National Institutes of Health (NIH) -- to protect people from health problems related to global warming	18	22	27	7	15	10
Increased funding to your state public health department to protect people from health problems related to global warming	13	23	31	8	15	9
Increased funding to your local public health department to protect people from health problems related to global warming	11	24	33	8	15	9

(Base: Americans 18+, n=1,275)
How much do you trust or distrust each of the following as a source of information about health problems related to global warming?

	Strongly trust	Moderately trust	In between	Moderately distrust	Strongly distrust	Not sure
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Your primary care doctor	19	30	27	4	4	14
Climate scientists	17	23	29	7	10	13
Family and friends	16	25	35	6	4	13
The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)	14	27	28	9	10	12
The World Health Organization (WHO)	11	26	29	8	11	14
The American Medical Association (AMA)	10	30	30	8	8	13
The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)	9	25	28	11	13	12
Other kinds of scientists (that is, not climate scientists)	9	24	37	7	8	14
Your local public health department	7	26	36	9	8	13
Environmental organizations	7	24	31	10	14	12
Religious leaders	7	17	32	12	17	15
U.S. military leaders	5	17	37	14	11	15
Television weather reporters	4	21	37	14	9	13

Appendix II: Survey Method

The data in this report are based on a nationally representative survey of 1,275 American adults, aged 18 and older, conducted from October 17-28, 2014. All questionnaires were self-administered by respondents in a web-based environment. The survey took, on average, about 29 minutes to complete.

The sample was drawn from GfK's KnowledgePanel®, an online panel of members drawn using probability sampling methods. Prospective members are recruited using a combination of random digit dial and address-based sampling techniques that cover virtually all (non-institutional) resident phone numbers and addresses in the United States. Those contacted who would choose to join the panel but do not have access to the Internet are loaned computers and given Internet access so they may participate.

The sample therefore includes a representative cross-section of American adults – irrespective of whether they have Internet access, use only a cell phone, etc. Key demographic variables were weighted, post survey, to match US Census Bureau norms.

The survey instrument was designed by Anthony Leiserowitz, Geoff Feinberg, Seth Rosenthal, and Jennifer Marlon of Yale University, and Edward Maibach and Connie Roser-Renouf of George Mason University.

Margins of error

All samples are subject to some degree of sampling error—that is, statistical results obtained from a sample can be expected to differ somewhat from results that would be obtained if every member of the target population was interviewed. Average margins of error, at the 95% confidence level, are as follows:

- October 2014: Fielded October 17-28 with 1,275 American adults. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3 percentage points.
- April 2014: Fielded April 21 – 24 with 1,013 American adults. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3 percentage points.
- November 2013: Fielded November 23 through December 9 with 830 American adults. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3 percentage points.
- April 2013: Fielded April 8-15 with 1,045 American adults. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3 percentage points.
- September 2012: Fielded August 31 through September 12, 2012 with 1,061 American adults. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3 percentage points.
- March 2012: Fielded March 12 through March 30, 2012 with 1,008 American adults. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3 points.
- November 2011: Fielded October 20 through November 16 with 1,000 American adults. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3 points.
- May 2011: Fielded April 23 through May 12 with 1,010 American adults. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3 points.
- June 2010: Fielded May 14 through June 1 with 1,024 American adults. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3 points.
- January 2010: Fielded December 24, 2009 through January 3, 2010 with 1,001 American adults. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3 points.
- November 2008: Fielded October 7 through November 12 with 2,164 American adults. Data were

collected in two waves: wave 1 from October 7 through October 20 and wave 2 from October 24 through November 12. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 2 points.

Rounding error

For tabulation purposes, percentage points are rounded off to the nearest whole number. As a result, percentages in a given chart may total slightly higher or lower than 100%.

Appendix III: Sample Demographics

	N (unweighted)	% (weighted)
Total	**1,275**	**100**
Sex		
Men	629	48
Women	646	52
Age		
Millennials (18-30)	208	23
Generation X (31-48)	338	29
Baby Boomers (49-67)	529	35
WWII (68+)	200	13
Education		
Less than high school	78	12
High school graduate	388	30
Some college/tech	359	29
College graduate	252	17
Post graduate	198	13
Household Income		
<$25K	237	18
$25K - <$50K	274	23
$50K - <$75K	237	18
$75K - <$100K	182	15
$100K - <$125K	168	13
$125K+	177	13
Hispanic		
Yes	108	15
Race/Ethnicity		
White, non-Hispanic	999	66
Black, African-American non-Hispanic	96	12
Other non-Hispanic	72	8
Region		
Northeast	242	18
Midwest	314	21
South	442	37
West	277	23