

Elon Poll Finds COVID-19 Pandemic Creating High Levels Of Anxiety

By Administrator

Tuesday, 07 April 2020 09:27 -

A new national survey by the Elon University Poll has found high levels of anxiety about the personal and financial impact from the novel coronavirus 2019, known at COVID-19, with uncertainty about the possible toll of the virus upon the U.S. population. The population is divided over whether leaders are exaggerating or downplaying the threat from COVID-19 and whether health officials have an accurate idea of the scale of the outbreak nationally.

The survey of nearly 3,300 U.S. residents found an accurate understanding of several facets of COVID-19 and the public health response, such as its disproportionate impact upon the health of older residents and the effectiveness of social distancing in preventing its spread. However, respondents are split over whether the virus is more dangerous than the flu, with a range of understanding about the symptoms of COVID-19 infection activities that could put residents at risk of infection.

The Elon Poll also surveyed more than 1,100 North Carolina residents, and found that responses from North Carolinians generally mirrored those from the national population. Additionally, the survey included the option for open-ended responses, with the poll's final report including a sampling of notable comments.

"The majority of Americans have had their lives disrupted by coronavirus. Their attitudes and choices in the weeks ahead will be important for future outcomes of the health and economic crises," said Jason Husser, director of the Elon University Poll and associate professor of political science. "We tested the prevalence of 25 key pieces of information. While we found broad consensus about some facts such as fever being a symptom and it being a good idea to maintain distance in public spaces, we also found substantial variation about perceptions of risk, duration of the crisis and potential mortality. Those variations are important for decision makers to consider as they implement organization-wide or community-wide policies."

The survey included a list of 25 statements about COVID-19, with respondents asked whether they agree the statement, disagree with it, or are not sure about it. The survey of 3,270 U.S. residents and 1,167 N.C. residents was conducted March 16-17 using an online opt-in sample marketplace. The survey has a credibility interval of +/- 1.9 percent for the national sample and +/- 3.1 percent for the North Carolina sample. The credibility interval is an accuracy measure for opt-in online surveys. A fuller explanation of the credibility interval and the survey methodology are available in [the full report](#).

Personal concerns and worries

A portion of the statements that respondents were asked to react to sought to gauge their level of concern about a range of issues. Nearly three out of four respondents (74 percent) agreed with the statement, "I'm worried about the impact of coronavirus on my personal financial situation," and a similar portion (78 percent) agreed with the statement, "I'm worried

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about a family member developing severe illness from coronavirus."

Generally speaking, Democrats were more likely to be concerned about the financial impact from coronavirus than Republicans or independents, and younger respondents were more concerned than those who were over the age of 65. That same trend held true for responses to the question about family members becoming sick.

Respondents were less concerned about being infected or spreading that infection to others, though more than half carried those concerns. Fifty-seven percent agreed with the statement "I'm worried about developing severe illness from coronavirus" and 59 percent agreed with the statement, "I'm worried about spreading the coronavirus to others."

Looking more closely, Democrats were more likely to be concerned about developing a severe illness from coronavirus or sharing it with others than Republicans or independents. Seventy percent of respondents with chronic diseases were concerned about the developing a coronavirus illness compared to 50 percent of those who do not have chronic diseases.

"Many COVID-19 polls will be available in coming weeks. Interpreting the significant findings of these polls requires a different lens than used for election coverage," Husser said. "The primary interest for most readers of political polls is to learn which position or candidate has a plurality or majority of support. When it comes to COVID-19 surveys, I am particularly interested in the magnitude of the minority of opinions. For example, 36 percent of our sample responded 'disagree' to 'I'm worried about spreading coronavirus to others.' To me, that suggests a potential for more risky behavior than if only 10 percent disagreed."

Many are preparing for long-term disruptions from COVID-19. Two out of three respondents said they agreed with the statement, "My life will be disrupted for more than two months due to the coronavirus," while 20 percent disagreed and nearly 14 percent said they were unsure.

Public health and medical experts have estimated that the development of a COVID-19 vaccine could take at least a year, though that development is moving quickly. Half of respondents agreed with the statement, "I won't be able to get a vaccine for coronavirus before next year," while 18.5 percent disagreed and 32 percent said they didn't know.

Response and leadership

There was a lack of a unified opinion about how leaders, including those in health care, are responding to the continued spread of COVID-19 and their ability to fully understand the extent of the threat.

Asked to react to the statement, "Some leaders are exaggerating the threat from coronavirus for political gain," 43 percent of respondents disagreed but 40 percent agreed and 17 percent said they were not sure. Asked about a similar statement, that "Some leaders are downplaying

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the threat from coronavirus for political gain,” 51 percent agreed while 30 percent disagreed and 19 percent said they were not sure.

As expected, there were variations in the responses based upon political affiliation, with Democrats more likely to say leaders were downplaying the threat and Republicans more likely to say leaders were exaggerating the threat for political gain.

Shifting the focus to leaders in health care, the poll asked respondents to react to the statement, “Health officials have an accurate idea of the scale of the coronavirus outbreak in the United States.” More than half — 53 percent — disagreed that those leaders understand the scale of the outbreak, while 29 percent disagreed and 18 percent said they were not sure.

There was little variation in responses based on political affiliation. Fifty-five percent of Democrats, 53 percent of independents and 51 percent of Republicans disagreed with the statement that health officials have an accurate idea of the scale of the outbreak.

“As coronavirus cases grow exponentially, the political response to the crisis evolves rapidly,” Husser said. “In turn, the public’s thoughts about the virus will likely fluctuate substantially and quickly.”

Symptoms and health precautions

The discussion about the potential impact from COVID-19 has generated comparisons to the flu, which in the past has had devastating public health impacts, but for which a vaccine is developed annually and made accessible to broad swaths of the global population.

The Elon Poll found that respondents were divided over how COVID-19 compares to the flu. Half (49 percent) disagreed with the statement “On average, coronavirus is no more dangerous to me than the flu” while 42 percent agreed. An additional 9 percent said they were unsure.

There appears to be widespread understanding of whether an annual flu vaccine will protect people against COVID-19. Eighty-four percent of respondents correctly agreed with the statement, “The flu shot protects against coronavirus,” while 13 percent said they were unsure about the statement and 3.5 percent disagreed.

Respondents were also asked to react to a range of statements about COVID-19 symptoms, some of which were true and some which were false. For instance, 90 percent correctly agreed with the statement, “Fever is a common symptom of coronavirus.” Asked to react to the statement, “Sneezing is a common symptom of coronavirus,” 46 percent incorrectly agreed that it was while 34 percent correctly disagreed and another 19.5 percent said they were not sure.

While many infected with COVID-19 do experience flu-like symptoms, there are also many who can carry the infection without displaying symptoms. The Elon Poll asked respondents to

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react to the statement,” If you get coronavirus, you’ll be able to tell from your flu-like symptoms,” with 46 percent correctly disagreeing. The poll found that 37.5 percent incorrectly agreed with the statement and another 17 percent said they were not sure.

There was broad understanding of several messages that have been prominent during the COVID-19 response, namely that social distancing — remaining at least six feet from others — can help reduce the spread of the virus, and that those who are older are more at risk. The poll found that 97 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that, “It’s a good idea to maintain some distance from people in a public setting.” Additionally, 98 percent agreed with the statement, “The elderly are at higher risk of severe illness from coronavirus.”

There is uncertainty around the country about how well-equipped the health care system is to respond to the spread of COVID-19 what the ultimate impact of COVID-19 will be. More than two out of three (68 percent) agreed with the statement, “There are not enough hospital beds and intensive care units in the United States, even if there is a major outbreak,” while 16 percent said they disagree and another 16 percent said they were not sure.

Asked to react to the statement, “Coronavirus will likely kill at least 100,000 Americans,” the most popular response, given by 40 percent of respondents, was “not sure.” Thirty-two percent said they disagree and 28 percent said they agreed.

“We intentionally did not mention any political leaders by name in this survey, to avoid priming partisan responses to these questions,” said Kaye Usry, assistant director of the Elon University Poll and assistant professor of political science and policy studies. “We were more interested in whether Republicans and Democrats differ in their level of awareness about the coronavirus outbreak. Although Republicans and Democrats differ in their responses to many of these items, on some key facts, they are in agreement with one another. For example, Republicans and Democrats were equally likely to agree that fever is a common symptom, that the elderly are at higher risk of severe illness, and that it is a good idea to maintain some distance from people in public settings.”

Media coverage

Beyond asking their reactions to the list of 25 statements, respondents were also asked about how the media is covering the coronavirus outbreak and what media sources respondents are turning to.

Forty-six percent said they trust the news media “a fair amount” to handle the coverage of the coronavirus outbreak, the most popular response. Twenty-nine percent said they do not trust the media very much to handle the coverage, while 15 percent said they don’t trust the news media at all, and 11 percent said they trust the news media “a great deal.”

Ninety percent of respondents said they have seen or heard news about coronavirus “multiple times a day,” with 63 percent saying they discuss coronavirus with the people in their lives “multiple times a day.”

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Three out of four respondents said that they have seen or heard news about coronavirus on national news networks ABC, CBS or NBC during the past week, while 60 percent said they have seen or heard news about the virus on local television news. Nearly half — 47 percent — said they have seen or heard news about coronavirus on Fox News, roughly the same portion who said they had seen or heard news about coronavirus on CNN (46 percent).

“Trust in the media has important consequences for awareness about coronavirus,” Usry said. “Among those who trust the media at least a fair amount, 65 percent said they are worried about developing severe illness about coronavirus. By comparison, only 46 percent of those who do not trust the media reported having this worry and those who trust the media were more likely to know that coronavirus is more dangerous than the flu.”