

**WHAT CITIZENS DON'T KNOW: PREPAREDNESS POLL. *Paul C. Light.* Governing. v. 19 no. 1 (October 2005)**

Copyright Governing 2005

As the memories of September 11th continue to fade, so does concern about preparedness. Americans may have enough bottled water and canned food to last a few days, but they are depending on state and local governments and charitable organizations to tell them what to do if the terrorists strike again.

It is not that Americans somehow think the threat of another attack is over. According to preliminary responses from a new telephone survey of 1,500 Americans that I recently conducted on behalf of New York University's Center for Catastrophe Preparedness and Response, more than two thirds of the public think there will be a bombing at of a local shopping center or grocery store somewhere in the country next year, and more than half think there will be a release of a deadly virus or disease.

It is just that most Americans think it cannot happen to them. Only a quarter of the respondents think a bombing or biological attack will occur where they live in the next year, and barely a third think either will occur in the next five years. Their towns are just too small, too suburb, their farms too isolated, or their industries just too unimportant to attack.

More importantly to their own preparation, they have come to believe that their own police and fire departments, local governments, hospitals, and charitable organizations are all on guard to protect them even if the terrorists decide there is some reasons to strike their communities. Asked whether their local institutions are prepared for a bombing or deadly virus, three quarters say local police, fire, government, and charities are very or somewhat prepared for a bombing, and two thirds say the same about the release of a deadly virus that spreads quickly across their communities. And those who say their local institutions are not prepared are very forgiving—the vast majority of Americans say it is just not possible for anyone to be prepared for what is coming.

Unfortunately, this confidence is based more on hope and expectation than reality. Only 20 percent say they are familiar with their state or local government's plan for a terrorist attack, and only 37 percent have a plan with their family and friends about who everyone would contact in the event of an emergency. Many Americans are simply unsure about what to do in preparing for a potential attack. Half say they are not sure exactly where to turn for help in preparing for a potential emergency, two thirds say they wish they were more organized, and eight out of ten say they are not sure what to expect.

As for what they would do in the event of a real attack, Americans are literally all over the place. Asked about the first thing they would do if terrorists exploded a bomb in a local shopping center or grocery store near them, a fifth of the public would check on their family and friends, go home, and gather their family together. Another fifth would assist others, go the site of the attack to provide help, and see if volunteers are needed. And still another fifth would gather supplies, secure their home, defend their property, or seek medical attention. Only a tenth would seek information from the media or call 911.

In contrast, asked about the first thing they would do if terrorists released a fast-spreading disease or virus across their community, a third said they would gather supplies, secure their home, seek medical attention, and so forth, while just 2 percent would try to assist others. A fifth would check on family and friends, go home, and so forth, while just a tenth would seek information from the media or call 911.

**These hypothetical responses to two very different scenarios suggest the difficulties facing state and local governments as they prepare for the inevitable. Although most Americans would eventually turn to the media for information, their first reactions to the two scenarios are to fight, gather, volunteer, or flee. They would certainly not wait patiently to be told what to do.**

**This is where the lack of preparedness is so dangerous. Most Americans do not know anything about their government's plan for a catastrophic event, and most say they are not personally well prepared. Hence, the great variation in how they say they would respond to the two very different scenarios presented above.**

**Where state and local governments have plans, they must work harder to make sure their citizens understand what to do, especially by helping local businesses communicate with employees. Where they have yet to develop plans, state and local governments must get cracking. Their citizens will be going every which way but loose in the event of an actual attack. State and local institutions need to make sure they are ready to control that chaos.**

**Paul C. Light is the author of *The Four Pillars of High Performance* and a professor at New York University's Robert F. Wagner School of Public Service.**