



# Selling Disaster Preparedness to the Public: Why Are They Not Buying?

Andrew Garrett MD, MPH  
David Abramson PhD, MPH  
Irwin Redlener, MD

Address all correspondence to:

Andrew Garrett MD MPH  
National Center for Disaster Preparedness/Columbia University  
722 West 168<sup>th</sup> Street, 10<sup>th</sup> Floor  
New York, NY, USA 10032  
E-mail: ag2612@columbia.edu

## BACKGROUND

### Research Objective

Working under the assumption that choosing to take disaster preparedness actions for one's self is a healthy behavioral change, we used a specifically designed question on a national preparedness survey to determine how the American public was distributed among the categories of the Stages of Change model (Prochaska). Integrating this information into a national messaging strategy may be an important step to increase the national prevalence of personal disaster preparedness.

### Overview

In August 2006, the National Center for Disaster Preparedness (NCDP) at Columbia University completed its annual survey of the American public's attitudes and views on terrorism, disaster preparedness, and associated issues. This survey was the latest in a series that is conducted annually, and began in the months after September 11, 2001. These surveys have demonstrated a consistently low prevalence of disaster preparedness across the U.S. at the individual and family level, ranging from 35-45% for those who have taken steps to ensure a supply of water and food, supplies, and a family communication plan, with no evident trend in this data over the four installments of the survey.

During this time period, there have been extensive efforts made by authorities to promote personal and family preparedness, using print and broadcast media, as well as the emergence of over one million websites that include the terms "disaster preparedness" or "emergency preparedness." The prevalence data suggest that this may not be having the intended effect of influencing more of the public to undertake personal preparedness actions.

## STUDY DESIGN

The national survey was conducted July 19-August 7, 2006. 1,207 adults 18 years of age or older within the continental United States were interviewed by telephone. Telephone numbers were selected based upon a complete list of telephone exchanges from throughout the nation. The exchanges were selected to ensure that each region in the country was represented in proportion to its population and findings. Interviews were conducted in both English and Spanish, and were anonymous.

A question was specifically designed to assess the public's willingness to undertake personal preparedness by asking respondents to place their current state of preparedness into one of five categories, as outlined by the Stages of Change model.

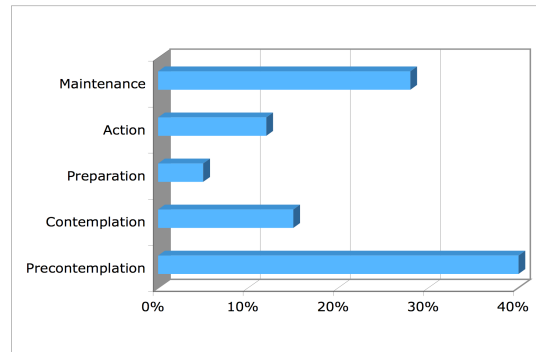
## RESULTS

The question designed to explore this topic was:

*"In thinking about preparing yourself for a major disaster, which could include gathering surplus food, medicine, or other supplies, or developing a plan such as having emergency contacts and meeting points, which of the following best represents your preparedness?"*

The possible responses were as follows, designed to describe each of the stages in the model:

Precontemplation	Contemplation	Preparation	Action	Maintenance
<i>I am not planning to do anything about preparing</i>	<i>I have not yet prepared, but I intend to in the next 6 months</i>	<i>I have not yet prepared, but I intend to in the next 1 month</i>	<i>I just recently began preparing</i>	<i>I have been prepared for at least the past 6 months</i>



## DISCUSSION

Disaster preparedness can be undertaken by an individual as a tangible behavior change with the goal of promoting health, much like smoking cessation or a change to a healthier diet. It is also a behavior change that can be and is promoted heavily by public authorities through public messaging. Although there is some conceptual controversy surrounding the ability to "prepare for preparedness," the Stages of Change is one useful model for exploring public preparedness if it is seen as a discrete act and not a contemplative state of its own. This is the premise behind this particular question.

Current preparedness messaging in the U.S. focuses heavily on several desired outcomes of preparedness such as, "get a kit," "be informed," and "make a plan," or by asking the question "are you ready?" However, it does little to address the specific motivational needs of those in the population who have yet to undertake this desired action despite several years of repeated messaging, namely the approximately 55% who fall into the *contemplative* or *precontemplative* stages. Those currently in *contemplation* may be considering preparedness, yet remain very uncertain about altering their behavior, and those in *precontemplation*, who remain unengaged despite ongoing efforts, may feel a sense of immunity to the issue and may be very difficult to convince otherwise. This becomes an issue of relaying the right kind of information from authorities to the public through targeted messaging.

Four years after the renaissance of disaster preparedness in the U.S. after 9/11, one key approach to further increasing public levels of readiness beyond its current levels is likely not to continue with a "one size fits all" messaging strategy. It is unlikely that this approach will recruit additional individuals beyond its current success, and this is evidenced by the prevalence of preparedness in the U.S. which has wavered about a baseline of just over 1 in 3 adults over the past four years. Specific tactics which are targeted towards those in the two different stages of non-action are an important next step. Those in *precontemplation* represent the largest and most challenging audience, as they will likely require an approach which facilitates an engagement of the topic using a tailored and indirect method-- a concept not included in the current mass messaging strategy which assumes that the public will be receptive to the message being delivered. They also represent the greatest reservoir of potential success. Those in *contemplation* are more likely to be encouraged to act, but to motivate this group to change their behavior may require another specially tailored approach which acknowledges and addresses the ambivalence they likely feel towards preparedness.