

Climate Change: A Serious Threat to Public Health

Key Findings from ASTHO's 2009 Climate Change Needs Assessment

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the warming of the global climate system is unmistakable.ⁱ This phenomenon is already contributing to the global burden of death and



disability.ⁱⁱ Scientists expect climate change to have wide-ranging health effects, from vector-borne disease to heat stress to increasingly powerful and frequent natural disasters.ⁱⁱⁱ In the United States, leaders of state and territorial public health agencies will be at the forefront of efforts to understand, prevent, mitigate, and adapt to these public health threats posed by climate change.

The Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO) surveyed state and territorial health agencies regarding current activities and programs designed to address the public health consequences of climate change. Forty-three states and territories completed the survey between December 16, 2008 and January 30, 2009. Administered electronically, the 32 question needs assessment focused on the current climate change practices, perceptions, and resource needs of state and territorial health agencies. The survey provides the Climate Change Collaborative, ASTHO's cross-cutting expert panel, with a research base for moving forward with initiatives designed to help address climate change from a state and territorial health agency perspective.

Main Messages

State/Territorial Health Officials think climate change will result in serious public health problems.

Thirty-one of 43 survey respondents (73%) believed their state or territory would experience one or more serious public health problems in the next 20 years because of climate change. Figure 1 depicts these results in a visual format.

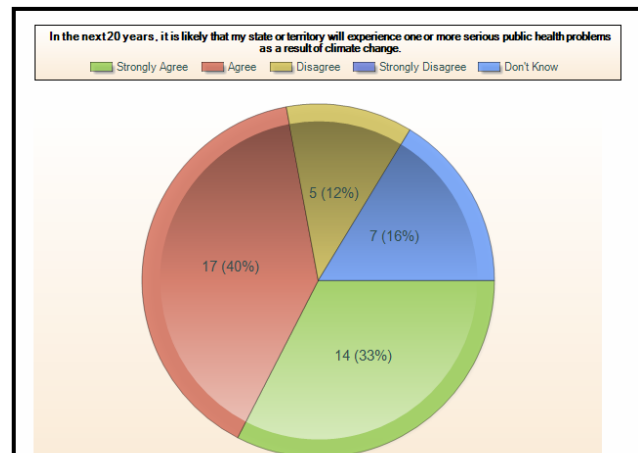


Figure 1- Survey respondents and their predictions on the public health effects of climate change in their jurisdictions over the next 20 years.

State/Territorial Health Officials do not currently consider climate change to be one of their agencies’ top ten priorities.

Of 43 total respondents, nearly 77% did not consider climate change to be one of their agencies’ top ten priorities. Of the 10 respondents (23%) who listed climate change as a top ten priority, all but two respondents ranked the issue as one of their agencies’ top five concerns.

State/Territorial Health Officials report climate change will challenge the capacity of their agencies to respond in several areas.

Figure 2 shows the range of capacities of state and territorial health agencies to combat climate change. Twenty-nine respondents indicated that their health agency has sufficient expertise to conduct public education campaigns on climate change, while only 11 survey takers thought their health department has sufficient response expertise.

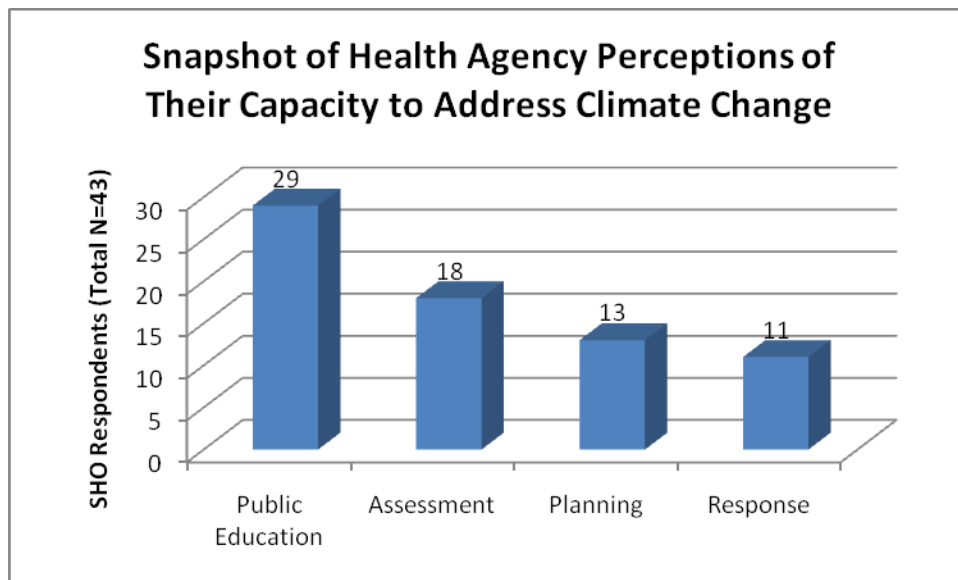


Figure 2-State Health Official affirmative responses regarding their agencies’ having sufficient capacity to undertake four different roles in confronting climate change.

Complete results from ASTHO’s Climate Change Needs Assessment will be available in May 2009 at www.astho.org. For questions about the survey, please contact Daniel Sinclair at dsinclair@astho.org.

ⁱ Bernstein, L., et al. 2007, Climate Change 2007: Synthesis Report, Summary for Policymakers, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Spain. Available from: http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar4/syr/ar4_syr_spm.pdf.

ⁱⁱ Confalonieri, U., Menne, B., et al. 2007, ‘Chapter 8-Human Health’, Climate Change 2007: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Spain. Available from: <http://www.ipcc-wg2.org/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*