**Despite What You’ve Heard, Americans Support Wearing Masks**

**and other Efforts to Reduce Exposure to COVID-19**

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Sensational stories of conflict around policies related to the COVID-19 pandemic are plentiful, but recent research suggests these controversies may not represent the attitudes and behaviors of most individuals across the U.S.

Recently released survey data reveals stark differences between the behaviors and beliefs of residents across U.S. states, but also shows that Americans are generally compliant and supportive of actions their local and state governments are taking to slow transmission of the virus and reduce risks. The findings of this survey are not only useful to policymakers, but also businesses that are attempting to re-open or cope with uncertainty during the pandemic.

[*The Risk and Social Policy Working Group*](http://www.riskandsocialpolicy.org) – our interdisciplinary team of public health, public policy, psychology, political science, and communication researchers from across the U.S., funded by the National Science Foundation – examined how individuals perceive the risks associated with COVID-19, as well as how they respond through their behaviors and adherence to policies such as mask-wearing and stay-at-home orders. As we observe a surge in cases across a number of states, the research findings become more important and timely for policymakers and businesses grappling with decisions about re-opening or re-imposition of more stringent COVID-19 mitigation measures. Decisions are further complicated by [catastrophic economic collapse](https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/06/08/covid-19-to-plunge-global-economy-into-worst-recession-since-world-war-ii) in the second quarter of 2020, with millions of Americans out of work, and large and small businesses closing their doors.

Because state governments play a central role in guiding these often-difficult public health and economic decisions, our team conducted the first of a three-wave panel survey completed in early June of individuals residing in **Colorado, Massachusetts, Iowa, Washington, Louisiana, and Michigan**. These states were chosen to capture variation in the onset of the COVID-19 outbreak, risk reduction policies, and demographic and social factors. A second wave of our survey will survey the same participants to provide more critical and comparative understanding of the political, behavioral, and social dynamics of the pandemic as public health officials anticipate an increase in cases this fall during cold and flu season and we are able to track how risk perceptions and behaviors are changing over time.

In this first survey wave, several findings already provide insight into the views and behaviors of Americans, as well as their trust in government responses to the COVID-19 crisis.

* 66% of individuals say they always wear a mask in public indoor spaces.

In all the states surveyed, respondents expressed much higher levels of approval for state governors’ response to the pandemic than they expressed about Donald Trump’s performance. In only one state--Iowa--did approval of the governor’s actions fall below 60%, while Trump’s approval was no greater than 46% (in Louisiana). On average, respondents favored their governors’ actions over Trump’s by two to one.

Only 21% of participants think restrictions in their state should be LESS strict – the majority think they should be the same or stricter.

The highest approval ratings go to scientists over policymakers. 66% of respondents approved or strongly approved of their performance during the COVID-19 crisis.

* 50% of parents are somewhat or extremely likely to send their children to school in the Fall if schools are open for in-person learning.

The complete survey [report emphasizes](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ec4464f22cd13186530a36f/t/5ef0e413c14aa311f58404fe/1592845331607/FINAL_onepager_wave1.pdf) that understanding how individuals perceive the risks associated with COVID-19, as well as how they respond through their behaviors, is critical for creating effective risk communication strategies and risk reduction policies. It is also important for assessing the differential effects of state-level policies on risk perceptions and behaviors, especially as both the policies and the pandemic dynamics continue to evolve. For instance, while the survey data show that people generally overestimate their risk of contracting COVID-19, highly variable levels of compliance with recommended behaviors for slowing the spread of COVID-19 among respondents were observed across states.

Due to concern among the public, policymakers and businesses should consider the following as they adjust their policies and practices:

* While states, localities, and businesses want to resume economic activity, without COVID-19 under control, many Americans will not resume normal routines.
* Mask wearing is supported and adopted by a majority of survey respondents – and public health officials argue it is the most effective control over viral spread that we currently have – indicating the mask mandates are likely to be more effective and widely supported than other possible policies.
* Businesses should institute stringent mask wearing and COVID-19 risk reduction policies to make their customers more comfortable resuming some economic activity. Our data show that the public supports such measures.
* Consistent and transparent communication about risks from COVID-19 and actions being taken by governments and businesses may alleviate some of the fear based on lack of knowledge that some people currently express.

While these kinds of risk reduction policies that states issued in the first several months of the pandemic slowed the spread of COVID-19 in many places, the challenges for governments and businesses in dealing with the pandemic will continue in the coming months, especially as they make decisions around easing restrictions and re-opening normal routines. We hope that by understanding perceptions of Americans that governments can better communicate about the risks of COVID-19 and the policies aimed at bringing the crisis under control. Not only will this help policymakers develop better policies and communication approaches, but it will help individuals and businesses respond to and adjust to the ever-changing uncertainties associated with COVID-19.