

# Americans are skeptical of the CDC, Harvard poll shows

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By Travis Andersen Globe Staff, Updated May 13, 2021, 1:06 p.m.

Amid a [COVID-19 pandemic](#) that has killed more than 580,000 people in the United States, Americans are more inclined to heed the counsel of individual doctors and nurses than they are to trust government agencies like the CDC, according to a poll from the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

The [poll](#), released Thursday under the title “The Public’s Perspective on the United States Public Health System,” was conducted Feb. 11 to March 15, with a sample of 1,305 adults, the foundation said.

Respondents reported high confidence in health care workers for recommendations on boosting public health, with 71 percent voicing “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of trust in nurses, 67 percent trusting doctors, and 70 percent swearing by health care workers they know.

The poll found just 52 percent of respondents trust the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 41 percent trust state and local health departments, and a paltry 37 percent trust the Food and Drug Administration and the National Institutes of Health.

Yet the pandemic has highlighted the critical role played by the nation’s public health programs, the poll found, with 71 percent of respondents voicing support for “substantially increasing federal spending on” improving such initiatives, and 72 percent affirming that the work of public health agencies is extremely important or very important to the country’s well-being.

“We appear to be entering a new era for public health, with widespread recognition of the critical importance of public health agencies and broad public support for substantially more funding,” said Robert J. Blendon, codirector of the survey and the Richard L. Menschel Professor of Public Health and professor of health policy and political analysis emeritus at the Chan School, in a statement.

But success, Blendon continued, “requires increasing public trust in public health institutions and the perceived performance of these agencies.”

Blendon’s words were echoed by Richard E. Besser, the foundation’s president and chief executive, who also served previously as acting director of the CDC.

“Our nation’s public health system entered the pandemic underfunded and understaffed — problems that have persisted for generations — and the consequences of this underinvestment over the past year have been devastating,” Besser said in the statement.

“It is heartening that strong majorities of the American public support more substantial public health funding, which will put us in a better position to prepare for and respond to future health emergencies.”

Public health, Besser said, “must also use this moment to commit to addressing the systemic challenges to improved health and well-being — including structural racism and discrimination — that continue to consign too many people of color in this country to shorter, sicker lives.”