

Public Acceptance of the Surgeon General's Brochure on AIDS

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Synopsis.....

Public acceptance of the Surgeon General's brochure, "Understanding AIDS," was investigated in a nationwide telephone survey of a representative sample of 2,000 adults generated by random digit dialing. A response rate of 75 percent was achieved.

A total of 59 percent of respondents remembered receiving the brochure; of these, 68 percent read most of it and 20 percent read half of it or less. Most respondents reacted positively; 86 percent believed that it was a good use of government money, and only 7 percent would have preferred not getting it. Analysis by demographic characteristics indicated that blacks and young people were less likely to remember receiving the brochure than were whites and retired persons.

The public health community can assume that the mailing met with resounding approval and that other public health brochures would be welcomed.

EARLY IN THE SUMMER of 1988, the Public Health Service sent a brochure, "Understanding AIDS," a message from Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, to every household in the country (1). This action was unprecedented in the history of American public health endeavors. We polled a nationwide sample of adults to assess their reactions to the brochure. Because there had been extensive debate about the usefulness of such a brochure and about the appropriateness of the Federal Government disseminating information about AIDS (2), we wanted to know whether recipients had read the brochure, whether they were glad to receive it, and whether they believed that it was a worthwhile use of tax dollars.

Methods

A total of 2,000 telephone interviews were administered to a nationwide, random probability sample of adults (ages 18 years and older) using a stratified, random-digit dial procedure. Subjects were drawn from two distinct sampling frames. The first consisted of the nine standard metropolitan statistical areas (SMSAs) reported by the Centers for Disease Control as having the highest prevalence rates of AIDS (3): San Francisco, CA;

New York, NY-NJ; Jersey City, NJ; Miami, FL; Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood, FL; Newark, NJ; Houston, TX; Los Angeles-Long Beach, CA; and Washington, DC-MD-VA. The second sampling frame consisted of all geographic areas in the 50 States outside of those nine areas. One thousand interviews were completed within each sample. There were no significant differences between the two strata for the variables reported here (except as noted in the results), and therefore the data from both frames were combined.

Random dialing was used to ensure that every household in the country had an equal chance of selection. To randomize respondents within households, callers attempted to interview that household member over age 18 who had the most recent birthday (4). Designated respondents who did not speak English or who were not contactable during the survey period were excluded without replacement from the household. Up to 12 call-back attempts were made to reach the designated respondent.

A response rate of 75 percent was achieved. When non-English speaking respondents are included in the denominator, the response rate is 66 percent. The overall noncontact rate was 51 percent. Given the sampling strategy employed, the

Table 1. Public acceptance (percentage distribution of responses) of the Surgeon General's brochure on AIDS, by age, sex, and race, July 5–August 19, 1988, survey

Question and choice of response	Total	Age			Sex		Race	
		18–29 years	30–49 years	50 years or over	Male	Female	Black	White
1. In the last few weeks do you remember receiving a brochure from the Surgeon General in the mail about AIDS?								
Yes	59	50	59	64	56	61	49	60
No	37	46	36	30	39	35	47	35
Not sure	5	3	5	5	6	4	5	5
2. How much of the brochure did you read?								
All/almost all	67	65	65	69	62	70	79	65
About half	11	15	11	8	11	10	6	11
Less than half	10	9	11	9	11	9	13	10
None	13	11	13	14	16	11	2	14
3. Did you take the quiz in the back of the brochure?								
Yes	25	28	24	23	20	28	37	23
4. Have you discussed the brochure with anyone?								
Yes	43	41	46	41	38	47	52	42
5. Was this brochure a good use of government money?								
Yes	85	95	87	76	84	85	92	84
No	11	2	10	17	12	9	8	11
Not sure	5	3	4	7	4	6	1	6
6. Were there any parts of the brochure that offended you?								
Yes	2	1	3	1	2	2	2	2
No	89	93	88	87	88	89	97	88
Not sure	9	6	9	12	10	9	1	10
7. Were you glad to get this brochure or is this something you would have preferred you had not received?								
Glad to get it	84	92	87	76	82	86	92	83
Prefer not to have received ...	7	2	5	12	9	6	1	8
Not sure	9	6	7	13	10	9	7	9

NOTE: Columns do not add to 100 because of rounding error. Questions 2–7 asked of those who recalled receiving the brochure.

effective sample size for estimates of the entire population was 1,322. Thus, the maximum 95 percent confidence interval for percentages is ± 2.70 .

Interviews were conducted from July 5 through August 19, 1988. The interviews were monitored by trained supervisors, and at least 15 percent of all completed interviews were independently validated by supervisory staff. The interview questionnaire contained 70 items concerning public perception about AIDS and health care. The seven questions and choice of responses included in this report are given in the tables.

The data were weighted to account for the number of telephone lines in a household and the number of members in the household. They were also weighted for SMSA, race, sex, and age, using

1988 population estimates. The data were analyzed using the SPSSX-PC computer package.

Results

Fifty-nine percent of our respondents recalled receiving the brochure. In those areas with high AIDS prevalence, 50 percent recalled receiving the brochure, while in the areas with low prevalence, 60 percent recalled receiving it. Of those who remembered receiving it, 13 percent did not read it at all, 21 percent read half of it or less, and 68 percent read most of the brochure. Only a quarter of recipients (25 percent) took the quiz included in the brochure, but 43 percent of recipients discussed the AIDS brochure with another person.

Table 2. Public acceptance (percentage distribution of responses) of the Surgeon General's brochure on AIDS, by education and income, July 5–August 19, 1988, survey

Question and choice of response	Education (years)			Income (thousands of dollars)			
	Less than 12	12	More than 12	Less than 20	20–35	35–50	More than 50
1. In the last few weeks do you remember receiving a brochure from the Surgeon General in the mail about AIDS?							
Yes	54	55	63	62	54	61	58
No	38	41	34	34	40	35	40
Not sure.....	8	5	3	4	7	4	2
2. How much of the brochure did you read?							
All/almost all	65	65	68	69	70	64	69
About half	6	12	11	11	11	9	7
Less than half	13	10	9	10	7	11	12
None.....	17	14	12	11	12	17	12
3. Did you take the quiz in the back of the brochure?							
Yes	14	22	29	21	29	27	26
4. Have you discussed the brochure with anyone?							
Yes	36	42	45	40	44	44	47
5. Was this brochure a good use of government money?							
Yes	74	84	88	83	88	85	81
No	18	9	9	12	7	12	13
Not sure.....	8	6	3	5	5	4	6
6. Were there any parts of the brochure that offended you?							
Yes	2	1	2	2	2	2	1
No	83	89	91	90	89	87	92
Not sure.....	15	10	7	8	10	11	8
7. Were you glad to get this brochure or is this something you would have preferred you had not received?							
Glad to get it	80	85	84	82	85	86	87
Prefer not to have received	9	9	5	8	4	8	8
Not sure.....	11	6	10	10	12	6	5

NOTE: Columns do not add to 100 because of rounding error. Questions 2–7 asked of those who recalled receiving the brochure.

'The reluctance of some government officials to send educational material on AIDS to the American people on the grounds that it might be offensive now appears unfounded. This corroborates press reports that the Centers for Disease Control received few complaints.'

Most of those who received the brochure responded positively to it. They believed that it was a good use of government money (85 percent), 89 percent were not offended by any part of it, and 84

percent were glad they received it. Only 7 percent would have preferred not getting it; another 9 percent were not sure.

Tables 1 and 2 display the responses by demographic characteristics. Respondents living in areas of high AIDS prevalence were less likely to recall having received the brochure (50 percent) than were those in low prevalence areas (60 percent). Blacks (49 percent) and young people (50 percent) were less likely to remember receiving the brochure than were whites (60 percent) and retired persons (67 percent). Yet blacks who received the report were more likely to have read it (79 percent read all of it, 2 percent read none) than were their white counterparts (65 percent read all, 14 percent read none). Seventy-five percent of retired respondents read all or almost all of the brochure. More young

respondents (92 percent) were glad to receive it than middle aged (87 percent) or older ones (76 percent).

Discussion

Public acceptance of the Surgeon General's brochure on AIDS was extremely positive. Almost everyone who received it was glad to get it, very few were offended by it, and most thought it was a good use of their tax dollars. This finding confirms early press reports about the public's reaction (5). Although the survey was carried out after the June 30, 1988, target date for distribution of the brochure, dissemination of the publication was incomplete. Our finding that 59 percent of respondents recalled receiving the brochure is quite close to the 63 percent reported by the National Center for Health Statistics (6). This incomplete penetration may have been caused by delays in mailing and delivery. Other members of the household may have gotten the brochure and not passed it on to the respondent. Also, since people were interviewed up to 10 weeks after distribution began, some may have forgotten that they received the brochure. Of those who did recall getting the brochure, however, 87 percent reported reading at least some of it, higher than the 56 percent of adults who read a similar mailing in Switzerland (7). The National Center for Health Statistics estimates that 79 percent of persons who recalled receiving the brochure read at least some of it (6).

Our positive findings are interesting in light of the extensive debate that took place before the brochure was prepared and distributed (2,8). In September 1987, during the planning process, the effort was described as "hopelessly bogged down by bureaucratic intransigence and political meddling" (2). The reluctance of some government officials to send educational material on AIDS to the American people on the grounds that it might be offensive now appears unfounded. This corroborates press reports that the Centers for Disease Control received few complaints (5).

Of course, the ultimate purpose of the mailing, according to the Office of Technology Assessment (9), was to "increase knowledge and influence attitudes and beliefs." Whether these goals were reached will be determined by the Public Health Service in its evaluation of changes in recipients' knowledge and attitudes. As part of this evaluation, the Service monitored changes in the use of the National AIDS Hotline and counseling and testing services. Early reports indicated an increase

in the use of some hotlines immediately after the mailing was delivered of between two- (10) and one hundred-fold (5).

Our intent was to assess the public's acceptance of the brochure, and by our criteria it scored well. The public health community can assume that the mailing met with resounding approval. If the public needs additional information in the future, it is likely that another brochure would be welcomed.

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