

People in the US are changing their behavior, anticipating fallout of COVID-19

March 13, 2020



A new USC survey offers a snapshot of how coronavirus has changed behavior in America, from stockpiling emergency supplies and food to hygiene.

Contact: Jenesse Miller, jenessem@usc.edu or 213-810-8554 or Julie Labich, samere@price.usc.edu or 213-821-8188

Amid the rise of the coronavirus pandemic, many people in the United States perceive health and economic risks and are changing their behavior. That's according to a new survey conducted by researchers at the USC Dornsife Center for Economic and Social Research and the USC Schaeffer Center for Health Policy and Economics.

The results so far show that people are bracing for the health and economic fallout of the pandemic: 12% of people said there was a relatively high (greater than 25%) chance they could lose their job, while 18% of people said there was a relatively high (greater than 25%) chance they could run out of money. Of those with jobs, 59% said they would have difficulty working from home.

The study was led by USC professors [Daniel Bennett](#) and [Wändi Bruine de Bruin](#). Bennett and Bruine de Bruin believe it may help public health and policy leaders identify gaps in information and understand how the virus has affected everyday life.

“The coronavirus is both a health threat and an economic threat,” said Bennett, a research assistant professor of economics at the [USC Dornsife Center for Economic and Social Research](#). “The social distancing measures that are needed to limit transmission will also cause a lot of hardship. Many people do not feel that they can work remotely.” Bennett is an economist who studies how people make health decisions. He previously studied the 2003 SARS epidemic.

How people are protecting themselves

Most but not all respondents reported taking actions to protect themselves. When asked what they have been doing in the last seven days to keep themselves safe from the coronavirus:

- 85% said they have been washing their hands or using hand sanitizer more frequently
- 7% said they have worn a facemask
- 61% of the sample reported engaging in various forms of social distancing; the most common strategy (practiced by 45% of people) was to avoid contact with high-risk people
- 25% say they have avoided restaurants in general and 18% say they have specifically avoided Chinese restaurants
- In a pattern that could have indirect health implications, 6% of respondents say they have canceled or postponed a medical appointment
- 50% say they have prayed
- 22% say they have been stockpiling food and water

“It looks like most people are taking some action,” said Bruine de Bruin, a USC Provost Professor of Public Policy, Psychology and Behavioral Science. “But not everyone is reporting that they are stepping up handwashing, which seems like a potential concern unless they were already perfect at handwashing.” Bruine de Bruin is also a senior fellow at the [USC Schaeffer Center](#), where she co-directs the behavioral sciences program.

The survey of 2,436 U.S. residents is among the first in the nation to examine the extent of Americans’ concerns about the outbreak. Early results from the survey, which was conducted from March 10-12, provide insights about the perceptions and experiences of U.S. residents as the coronavirus begins to spread in some communities. The survey was carried out as the World Health Organization declared the spread of coronavirus a pandemic and as celebrities and politicians shared that they had become infected.

The median survey respondent saw a 10% chance of catching the coronavirus. If infected, the median respondent perceived a 5% risk of dying. According to preliminary results, 1.6% of U.S. residents have at least one close friend or family member who has been infected with COVID-19.

About the survey

The sample of 2,436 U.S. residents participated March 10-12, 2020. The margin of sampling error is +/-2 percentage points. The sample is preliminary, with full results to be released in the coming weeks. Survey respondents are members of USC Dornsife's Center for Economic and Social Research's [Understanding America Study \(UAS\)](#) probability-based internet panel. The survey was funded by USC. Information about the survey and the UAS panel, including methodology, question wording and results is available upon request to uas-1@usc.edu, and will be posted online at uasdata.usc.edu when the survey is complete.

###

Photo/Jean-Paul Chassenet; Alamy Stock