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Johnson County residents state that children should be vaccinated to attend school but residents vary in their beliefs about vaccine safety and how those opinions are formed.

A majority of Johnson County residents believe vaccines are safe and should be required to attend public school. However, a significant minority of residents believes vaccines are unsafe and do not trust government recommendations for vaccinations. A University of Iowa Hawkeye Poll conducted March 23, 2015 to March 29, 2015 asked 657 residents of Johnson County to weigh in on vaccine policy, safety, and trust in vaccination research and government recommendations.

Residents of Johnson County overwhelmingly believe that all children should be vaccinated. When asked if childhood vaccinations should be mandatory, 79.8 percent of respondents believed that all children should be vaccinated. Only 16.3 percent of respondents believed that parents should be able to decide whether to vaccinate their children. This is 20 percentage points higher than the national average of 60.0 percent who believe that all children should be vaccinated (Reason-Rupe October 2014 poll).¹ In our survey of Johnson County, residents in their 30s and 40s were the least likely to believe that vaccinations should be required (68.0 percent and 76.3 percent, respectively; all other age groups were above 80.0 percent). Democrats were slightly more likely to support mandatory vaccinations (84.9 percent) than Republicans (73.9 percent) and Independents (78.6 percent). Evangelical Protestants were far more likely to believe vaccinations should be a matter of parental choice (29.4 percent) compared to non-Evangelical religious (17.6 percent) and non-religious (9.8 percent) respondents.

For additional results, see the Topline Document.

Respondents believed that unvaccinated children should not be allowed in public schools (58.4 percent). This belief varied significantly across levels of education. Residents with some college or a four-year degree were the least likely to believe that only vaccinated children should be allowed in public schools (56.0 percent compared to 73.3 percent for high school graduates and 67.5 percent for respondents with a post-graduate degree). Non-religious respondents were also about ten percentage points more likely to say that unvaccinated children should not be allowed in schools compared to religious identifiers.

Most vaccines are safe, but trust of government agencies varies.

The majority of respondents agreed that vaccines are safe; however, 10.9 percent of Johnson County residents believe that the statement “vaccinations cause autism” is definitely or probably true. This belief was most prevalent among Republicans and Independents (12.4 percent and 20.8 percent, respectively, compared to 2.4 percent of Democrats). Religious and respondents with lower education were also more likely to believe the relationship is true.

¹ <http://reason.com/assets/db/14128084586864.pdf>

“Vaccinations are one of the 10 greatest public health achievements of the 20th century,” says Douglas E. Beardsley, Director of Johnson County Public Health. “Childhood deaths and serious disease, which was once commonplace before the introduction of vaccinations, have all but been eliminated. The current generation with young children have no experience or memory of these severe outcomes which gives us the “luxury” of debating the use of vaccinations. We share the same concern for the health and safety of children that their parents have. It is unfortunate that even when the original source of the so called “autism link” admits that it was a fraud, those claims still persist. We encourage those who still have concerns and questions to look to reputable sources of information, founded in good scientific research. It is our hope that we will not find ourselves repeating history, as it concerns childhood illness and death due to vaccine-preventable diseases, in order to maintain immunization rates where they need to be.”

Johnson County residents trust advice from both the U.S. and Iowa Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) when it comes to recommendations about vaccinations. However, trust for the Iowa office was significantly higher. While 10.8 percent of respondents did not trust the U.S. DHHS, only 1.1 percent distrusted the Iowa Department of Public Health (IDPH). Trust for the US DHHS was strongly contingent upon partisanship: 22.3 percent of Republicans and 24.2 percent of Independents did not trust the federal recommendations compared to only 1.2 percent of Democrats. In contrast, trust for the Iowa recommendations was bipartisan, with most of the variation ranging across the somewhat and strongly trust categories. Evangelical Protestants were also far less trustful of the federal guidelines, though their trust of the Iowa guidelines was similar to other groups.

The formation of vaccine beliefs

In order to better understand how people form opinions on vaccines, respondents were asked about how important several considerations factored in to their beliefs. 93.6 percent of respondents believed that it was very important or important for vaccination research to be “based on solid evidence.” Democrats and non-religious respondents were far more likely to agree that solid evidence was an important or very important consideration. For instance, 78.1 percent of Democrats agree that solid evidence is “very important” compared to 63.2 percent of Republicans and 69.7 percent of Independents. 82.6 percent of non-religious residents believe solid evidence is “very important” compared to 71.5 percent of non-Evangelical religious and 51.6 percent of Evangelical Protestants. Belief in the importance of solid evidence also varied across income and education groups.

Respondents were also asked how important it was that vaccination results were consistent with common sense. Overall, 51.4 percent of respondents stated that it was very important or important that vaccination research seemed like common sense. In contrast to the importance of solid evidence in forming an opinion, common sense was most important for Republicans, Independents and religious residents (64.1 percent and 55.6 percent, compared to 44.5 percent for Democrats; and 52.7 percent for non-Evangelical religious and 57.8 percent for Evangelical protestants, compared to 43.2 percent of non-religious). “This suggests that an important way to increase awareness of vaccine safety and effectiveness is to communicate with the public in a way that makes intuitive sense,”

says Rebecca Kreitzer, Department of Political Science PhD Candidate, and Hawkeye Poll Cooperative member.

Background: The Hawkeye Poll was conducted March 23-29, 2015 by the Hawkeye Poll. The poll was conducted by the Hawkeye Poll Cooperative, comprised of UI faculty, graduate, and undergraduate students in political science, with the cooperation and facilities of the Iowa Social Science Research Center, directed by UI Political Science Professor Frederick J. Boehmke. The faculty adviser for the poll is UI Professor of Political Science Frederick J. Boehmke. The poll is a teaching, research and service project of the UI Department of Political Science. The Department of Political Science, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, and the Office of the Provost fund the poll.

Respondent identification: A random sample was acquired with 50 percent household landline numbers and 50 percent mobile phone numbers. For households, an initial attempt was made on answering the phone to reach the “youngest male who is 18 years or older.” All who stated they were over age 18 and willing to participate in the survey were included.

Sample: The survey consisted of 657 Johnson County, Iowa residents; the margin of error is +/- 3.9 percent. Among these respondents, 50.08 percent were Democrat, 13.36 percent Republican and 31.72 percent Independent. 39.91 percent considered themselves moderate, while 43.15 percent self-identified as liberal and 16.95 percent as conservative.

Weighting: Reported results are weighted by sex and age.

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