

**Working Papers
Project on the Public and Biological Security
Harvard School of Public Health**

1.

PUBLIC RESPONSE TO THE ANTHRAX THREATS

**Robert J. Blendon, Harvard School of Public Health, Project Director
John M. Benson, Harvard School of Public Health
Catherine M. DesRoches, Harvard School of Public Health
Melissa J. Herrmann, ICR/International Communications Research**

November 8, 2001

Survey Shows Americans Not Panicking over Anthrax, but Starting to Take Steps to Protect Themselves Against Possible Bioterrorist Attacks

- Members of postal worker households significantly more worried about contracting anthrax
- Americans show weak trust of various public officials in biological crisis

For Immediate Release: Thursday, November 8, 2001

BOSTON, MA – The first in a series of surveys by the Harvard School of Public Health/Robert Wood Johnson Foundation *Survey Project on Americans' Response to Biological Terrorism* finds that most Americans think they and their families have a relatively low risk of contracting anthrax or smallpox. Americans believe it is far more likely that they or someone in their immediate family will get the flu (73% very or somewhat likely), or be injured in a fall (50%) or automobile accident (41%) during the next 12 months than that they will contract anthrax (14%) or smallpox (9%) ([Figure 1](#)).

However, about one-third (32%) of Americans from households where someone works for the U.S. Postal Service believe that they or someone in their family are very or somewhat likely to contract anthrax. Also, while only one-quarter (25%) of the public reports being very or somewhat worried about contracting anthrax through the mail at home or at work, more than half (56%) of Americans from postal worker households are worried about this threat ([Figure 2](#)).

Although most Americans think they are at relatively low risk of contracting anthrax or smallpox, a majority (57%) have taken one or more precautions in response to reports of bioterrorism. A substantial number report taking precautions when opening the mail (37%) and maintaining emergency supplies of food, water, or clothing (25%). It does not appear that Americans are panicking in their response to recent bioterrorist threats, as only 13% report taking three or more of 12 precautions, and 43% report doing none of them ([Figure 3](#)).

"Americans are not at the moment panicking about anthrax, but most are starting to take some sensible precautions," says Robert J. Blendon, professor of Health Policy and Political Analysis at the Harvard School of Public Health. "Many are being more careful with their mail and maintaining emergency supplies of food, water, or clothing, an action people often take to prepare for possible emergencies."

At the present time, most Americans are optimistic about treatment for anthrax. The majority believe they would be very or somewhat likely to survive with appropriate medical treatment were they to contract the skin or inhaled form of anthrax. They are slightly more likely to believe they would survive the skin form (91%) of the disease than the inhaled form (78%). One reason we are not seeing panic may be that most Americans believe that anthrax is not generally fatal with appropriate medical treatment.

The survey found no national figure trusted by a majority of the public as a source of reliable information during a national outbreak of disease caused by bioterrorism. Americans are more likely to trust public health officials and physicians than appointees

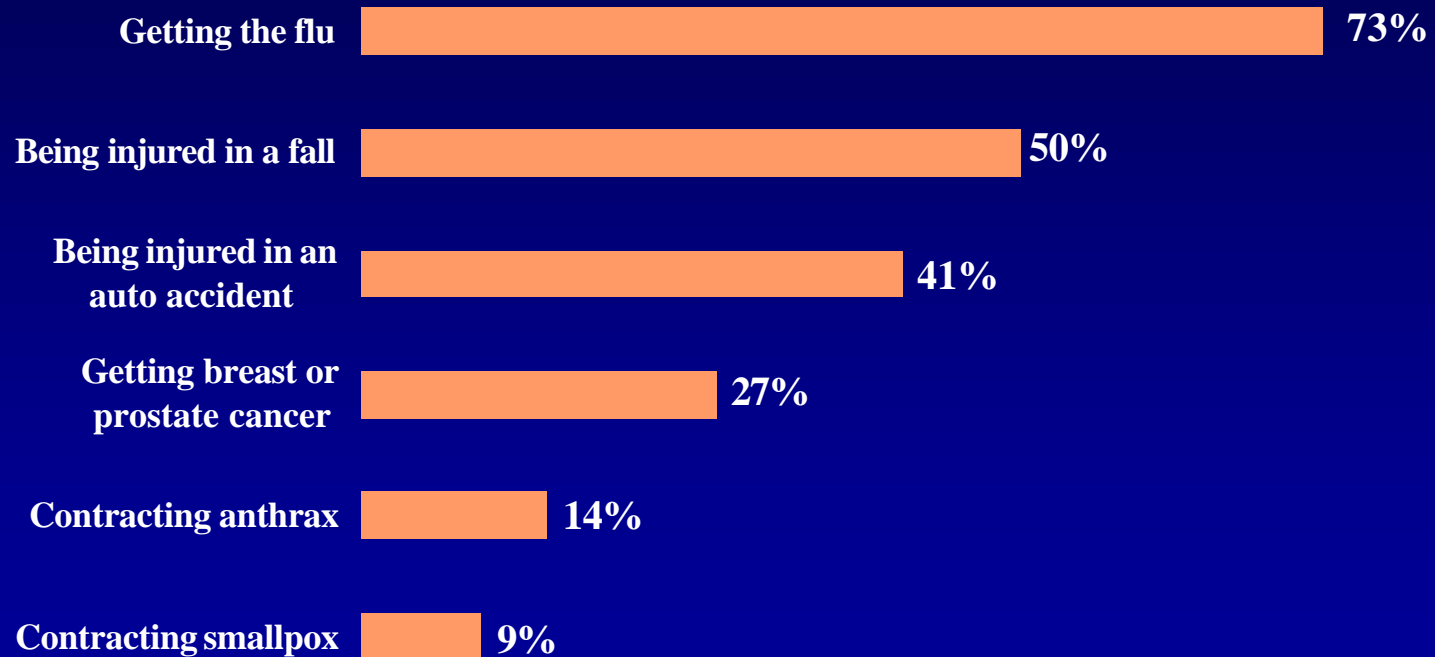
who do not have such backgrounds. The public reports having a great deal or quite a lot of trust in medical figures, including the Director of the CDC (48%), the U.S. Surgeon General (44%), and the President of the AMA (42%), but lower levels for senior appointees without medical backgrounds, such as the Secretaries of Health and Human Services (37%) and Homeland Security (34%), and the Director of the FBI (33%) ([Figure 4](#)).

On the local level, a majority express a great or quite a lot of trust in the directors of their local fire department (61%), their state or local police department (53%), and their state or local health department (52%) as sources of reliable information in the event of an outbreak in their local community. The fire department leadership on the local level rated the highest. Three-fourths (77%) of the public has a great deal or quite a lot of trust in their own doctor, which speaks to the importance of educating physicians about bioterrorist threats ([Figure 5](#)).

Figure 1

Americans' Perceptions of Their Likelihood of Contracting Anthrax or Smallpox

% who think the following events are very or somewhat likely to happen to them or someone in immediate family during next 12 months

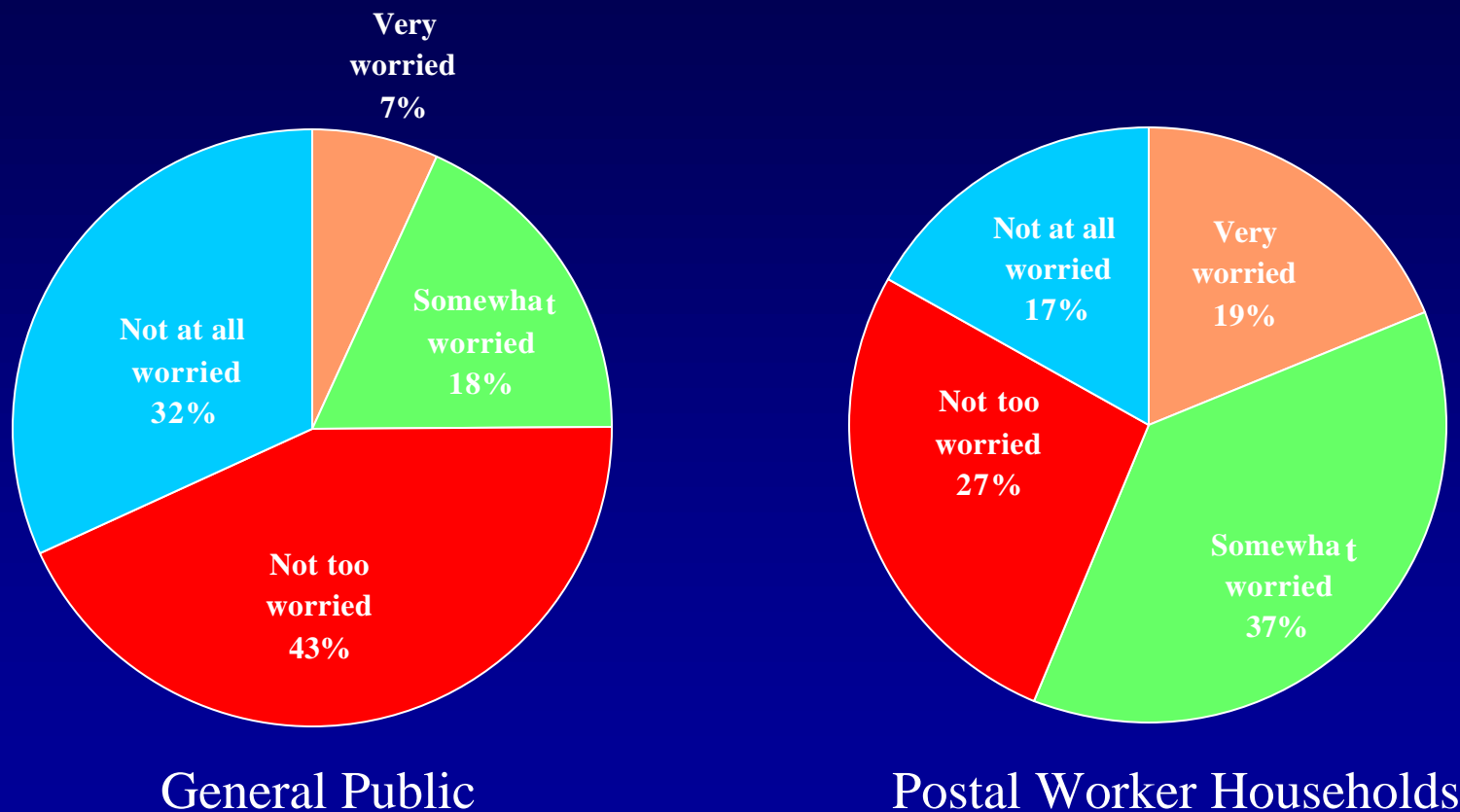


Source: Harvard School of Public Health/Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Survey Project on Americans' Response to Biological Terrorism, October 24-28, 2001.

Figure 2

Americans' Worries about Contracting Anthrax by Opening Mail at Home or Work

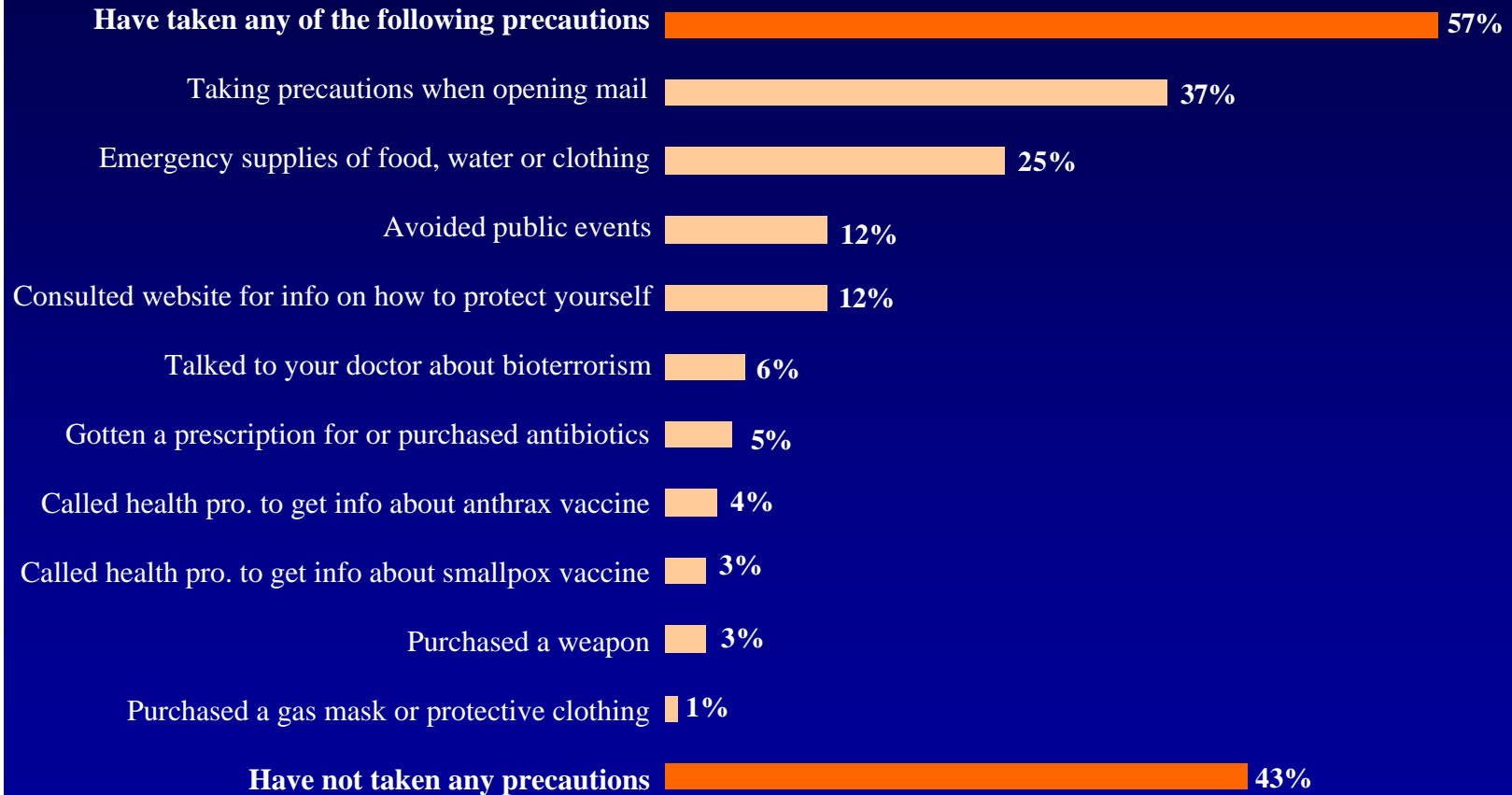
General Public and Postal Worker Households



Source: Harvard School of Public Health/Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Survey Project on Americans' Response to Biological Terrorism, October 24-28, 2001.

Figure 3

Precautions Americans Have Taken Against Possible Bioterrorism



Source: Harvard School of Public Health/Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Survey Project on Americans' Response to Biological Terrorism, October 24-28, 2001.

Figure 4

Whom Do Americans Trust as a Source of Reliable Information during a national outbreak of disease caused by bioterrorism



Source: Harvard School of Public Health/Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Survey Project on Americans' Response to Biological Terrorism, October 24-28, 2001.

Figure 5

Whom Americans Trust as a Source of Reliable Information in case of outbreak of disease caused by bioterrorism in your own community



Source: Harvard School of Public Health/Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Survey Project on Americans' Response to Biological Terrorism, October 24-28, 2001.

EXCEL

ICR'S TWICE WEEKLY NATIONAL TELEPHONE OMNIBUS SERVICE

**HARVARD SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH/
ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON FOUNDATION
SURVEY PROJECT ON AMERICANS' RESPONSE TO
BIOLOGICAL TERRORISM**

Tabulation Report

October 24-28, 2001

Research Team:

Robert J. Blendon, Harvard School of Public Health, Project Director

John M. Benson, Harvard School of Public Health

Catherine M. DesRoches, Harvard School of Public Health

Melissa J. Herrmann, ICR/International Communications Research

Contact:

Robert J. Blendon, 617-432-4502

Conducted by:



INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS RESEARCH

**605 West State Street, Media, PA 19063
Phone (610) 565-9280 · Fax (610) 565-2369**

www.icersurvey.com



605 West State Street
Media, Pennsylvania 19063-2620

Job #Q844
October 31, 2001

I N T E R N A T I O N A L C O M M U N I C A T I O N S R E S E A R C H

BIOTERRORISM INSERT

TOPLINE

This study was conducted by telephone October 24 – October 28, 2001 among a nationally representative sample of 1,015 respondents 18 years of age and older. Field work by ICR/International Communications Research of Media, PA

BI-1. I'm going to read you a list of things and ask you how likely you think it is that each of them will happen to you or someone in your immediate family during the next 12 months. (First/How about) (INSERT ITEM)? Do you think that is very likely to happen to you or someone in your immediate family, somewhat likely, not very likely, or not at all likely?

10/28/01	-----LIKELY-----			-----NOT LIKELY-----			Don't Know
	NET	Very	Somewhat	NET	Not very	Not at all	
a. Getting the flu	73	32	41	25	18	8	1
b. Contracting anthrax	14	4	10	82	43	39	4
c. Being injured in an automobile accident	41	6	35	54	37	17	5
d. Getting breast or prostate cancer	27	5	21	69	40	28	5
e. Getting injured in a fall	50	13	37	47	32	15	2
f. Contracting smallpox	9	3	6	88	38	50	3

BI-2. As a result of recent incidents of anthrax in the mail, how worried are you that you could contract anthrax from opening your mail at home or at work? Are you very worried, somewhat worried, not too worried, or not worried at all?

10/28/01	-----WORRIED-----			-----NOT WORRIED-----			Don't Know
	NET	Very	Somewhat	NET	Not too	Not at all	
10/28/01	25	7	18	75	32	43	*

(Asked of one half of total respondents [n = 512])

BI-3a. In the case of a national outbreak of disease caused by bioterrorism, how much would you trust each of the following as a source of reliable information? If you haven't heard enough about that person to have an opinion, just tell me. (First) How much would you trust (INSERT)? A great deal, quite a lot, some, or not very much?

10/28/01	---A great deal/Quite a lot---			-----Some/Not very much-----			Don't Know
	NET	A great deal	Quite a lot	NET	Some	Not very much	
a. The secretary for Health and Human Services Tommy Thompson	38	18	19	44	32	12	18
b. The director of the CDC, or Centers for Disease Control Jeff Koplan	48	26	22	37	25	12	15
c. The secretary for Homeland Security Tom Ridge	33	18	16	45	30	15	22
d. Senior CDC scientist Steve Ostroff	32	17	15	35	26	9	34
e. The director of the FBI Robert Mueller	33	15	18	52	34	18	14
f. The U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher	44	21	23	42	31	11	13
g. The president of the AMA, or American Medical Association Richard Corlin	42	20	22	41	30	11	17

(Asked of one half of total respondents [n = 503])

BI-3b. In the case of an outbreak of disease caused by bioterrorism in your own local community, how much would you trust each of the following as a source of reliable information? If you haven't heard enough about that person to have an opinion, just tell me. (First) How much would you trust (INSERT)? A great deal, quite a lot, some, or not very much?

10/28/01	---A great deal/Quite a lot---			-----Some/Not very much-----			Don't Know
	NET	A great deal	Quite a lot	NET	Some	Not very much	
a. The governor of your state	48	23	25	48	30	19	4
b. The directors of your state or local health department	52	25	27	41	28	12	7
c. The director of your local fire department	61	32	29	33	22	11	6
d. The director of you state or local police department	53	24	29	44	28	16	3
e. The director of your local hospital	53	28	25	38	27	11	9
f. Your own doctor	77	50	27	20	16	4	3
g. A local religious leader	46	27	19	49	25	24	5

BI-4. In response to reports of bioterrorism, have you or has someone in your household done any of the following? Have you...?

	Yes	No	Don't know
a. Purchased a gas mask or protective clothing	1	98	*
b. Consulted a website for information about how to protect yourself	12	88	1
c. Maintained emergency supplies of food, water, or clothing	25	75	*
d. Avoided public events	12	87	*
e. Purchased a weapon	3	97	-
f. Talked with your doctor about health issues related to bioterrorism	6	94	-
g. Gotten a prescription for or purchased antibiotics	5	95	-
h. Called a health professional to get information about the smallpox vaccine	4	96	-
i. Called a health professional to get information about the anthrax vaccine	3	97	-
j. Started taking precautions when opening mail	37	62	1

(Asked of respondents who have gotten a prescription for or purchased antibiotics in

response to reports of terrorism [n = 47])

BI-4a. Are you currently taking these antibiotics as a precaution against anthrax?

	Yes	No	Don't know
10/28/01	21	79	-

BI-4/4a Combo Table

	10/28/01
Have done any (NET)	57
Purchased a gas mask or protective clothing	1
Consulted a website for information about how to protect yourself	12
Maintained emergency supplies of food, water, or clothing	25
Avoided public events	12
Purchased a weapon	3
Talked with your doctor about health issues related to bioterrorism	6
Gotten a prescription for or purchased antibiotics	5
Currently taking them as a precaution against anthrax	1
Not currently taking them as a precaution against anthrax	4
Called a health professional to get information about the smallpox vaccine	4
Called a health professional to get information about the anthrax vaccine	3
Started taking precautions when opening mail	37
Have not done any	43

BI-4g/BI-4a Summary

	--Gotten a prescription for or purchased antibiotics--			Have not gotten a prescription for or purchased antibiotics
	NET	Currently taking them as a precaution	Not currently taking them as a precaution	
10/28/01	5	1	4	95

BI-5. Have you or has someone in your household called your state or local health department to get information about anthrax or smallpox?

	Yes	No	Don't know
10/28/01	4	96	1

(Asked of respondents who called state/local health department to get information

about anthrax or smallpox)

BI-5a. Did you get the information you were looking for from your health department, or not?

[insufficient data to draw conclusion]

BI-6. In response to reports of bioterrorism, have you or has someone in your household contacted the CDC, or Centers for Disease Control?

	Yes	No	Don't know
10/28/01	1	99	*

(Asked of respondents who have contacted the CDC)

BI-6a. Did you get the information or help you were looking for from the CDC, or not?

[insufficient data to draw conclusion]

BI-7. Have you or has someone in your household called your local law enforcement or health department to report that you saw or came into contact with something you suspected could be a bioterrorist threat, or not?

	Yes	No	Don't know
10/28/01	1	99	*

(Asked of respondents who called local law enforcement/health department to report something that was suspected to be a bioterrorist threat)

BI-7a. Did you get the help you were looking for, or not?

[insufficient data to draw conclusion]

BI-8. At work, school, or the place where you live, has anyone discussed with you plans for evacuation in the case of a terrorist attack, or not?

	Yes	No	Don't know
10/28/01	13	87	*

BI-9. If you were to contract the inhaled form of anthrax, how likely do you think it is that you would survive with appropriate medical treatment? Do you think it's very likely, somewhat likely, not too likely, or not likely at all that you would survive?

	-----LIKELY-----			-----NOT LIKELY-----			Don't know
	NET	Very	Somewhat	NET	Not too	Not at all	
10/28/01	78	40	38	18	9	9	4

BI-10. If you were to contract the skin form of anthrax, how likely do you think it is that you would survive with appropriate medical treatment? Do you think it's very likely, somewhat likely, not too likely, or not likely at all that you would survive?

	-----LIKELY-----	-----NOT LIKELY-----	Don't

	NET	Very	Somewhat	NET	Not too	Not at all	Know
10/28/01	91	67	24	7	4	2	3

BI-11. In light of recent events, do you think that the media is overestimating the threat to the average person from anthrax, underestimating the threat, or presenting the threat to the average person accurately?

	Overestimating the threat	Underestimating the threat	Presenting the threat accurately	Don't know
10/28/01	44	11	40	6

BI-12. In light of recent events, do you think that the Centers for Disease Control or the CDC is overestimating the threat to the average person from anthrax, underestimating the threat, or presenting the threat to the average person accurately?

	Overestimating the threat	Underestimating the threat	Presenting the threat accurately	Don't know
10/28/01	14	17	60	9

BI-13. Do you or does anyone in your household work for (INSERT)?

	Yes	No	Don't know
The U. S. Postal Service	3	97	-
The federal government	8	92	-
A media organization	1	98	*

Affected Group

	Yes	No
10/28/01	11	89

Precautions (based on Q.BI-4/BI-5/BI-6)

	0	1-2	3+
10/28/01	43	44	13