

Is your family ready for hurricane season?

Florida more prepared than other states, poll finds

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Orlando Sentinel

Posted May 17 2006, 12:05 PM EDT

MIAMI -- You would think that Florida's horrific 2004 hurricane season and the devastation wrought by Katrina last year would persuade coastal residents across the United States to prepare for this hurricane season. Well, think again. We humans often don't heed sound advice about what's good -- or bad -- for us. After all, we smoke too much. We drink too much. We eat way too much of the wrong artery-clogging stuff.

So it's little surprise to students of human nature that the majority of residents surveyed in coastal states from Maine to Texas don't think hurricanes -- or the tornadoes and floods they spawn -- pose them any risk. Consider these alarming statistics released Tuesday at the National Hurricane Center west of Miami:

- 60 percent of the respondents haven't bothered to develop a family disaster plan
- 68 percent don't have a hurricane-survival kit
- 83 percent haven't taken any measures since the past hurricane season to ensure their homes are ready for this one

"Katrina was certainly a national wake-up call, yet it seems that too many people are still asleep," said Max Mayfield, director of the center. "We face another active and potentially deadly hurricane season starting in just a couple of weeks, and it's vital that residents in hurricane-vulnerable states take the threat seriously and get prepared."

Disinclined to evacuate

Pollsters for Mason-Dixon Polling & Research, which surveyed 1,100 adults living in Atlantic and Gulf coast states from April 26 to May 2, did find a glimmer of good news in a separate poll conducted only in Florida, where 625 residents were questioned. Floridians, battered or brushed by eight hurricanes during the past two years, are somewhat better prepared than their counterparts, though considerably less likely to heed evacuation warnings, the poll found. Twenty-five percent of the Florida respondents -- nearly twice the number than in other coastal states -- said they would refuse to evacuate or weren't sure they would evacuate if ordered. Mayfield found that disturbing.

"This could amount to tens of thousands of people in harm's way creating a grave risk for themselves and for the first responders who will have to look after them," he said. But, at the same time, almost three-quarters of the Floridians surveyed said they do have a family disaster plan, and 70 percent said they have hurricane-survival kits. You wouldn't know it, though, by a reporter's own unscientific survey conducted Tuesday under drizzling skies in Orlando. Of the few dozen people interviewed, only one couple said they are prepared for the 2006 six-month hurricane season, which begins June 1.

Most everybody else expressed about as much concern about hurricanes as they did the Apophis asteroid striking Earth in 2036. That's when scientists say the 1,000-foot space rock has a 1-in-6,250 chance of striking Earth with 65,000 times the force of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima.

'I'm not ready'

The odds of a hurricane striking the United States are, of course, far greater -- even likely this year -- but that doesn't mean Randy Ogburn will worry about it. "Honestly, no. I'm not ready," the 39-year-old Orlandoan said. "I should be, but I haven't done a thing, and I don't know when I will." A lifelong Floridian, Nicole Sanchez, 20, also admitted doing the same thing -- nothing -- to get ready. Her explanation: "It's just procrastinating," she said. "It's human nature."

Human nature is Maurice Ramirez's bread and butter. An emergency-room physician in Central Florida, Ramirez sees people every day who think that, just because they've gotten away with risk-taking before, they will again and again. So he's "absolutely not" surprised about the poll results. "I'm in the business of taking care of people who are ill-prepared," he said. "Most come to the ER not because of some illness or disease but because they've made poor choices about smoking, eating, drinking or exercise. God love 'em, because they're putting my kids through college."

Dan Barr, owner of Barr's Equipment Service in Orlando, is counting on human nature, too -- especially the penchant for procrastinating -- to make his investment pay off. In anticipation of the coming season, he ordered 200 generators but has yet to receive an inquiry about them. "Not a single one," Barr said. "We won't hear anything until the weatherman says a hurricane is going to hit Florida -- or until it's already been here."

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