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Society for Risk Analysis

### **Conservative Views Don't Dampen African-American Males' Perceptions of Environmental Risk**

*Research calls for more study of minorities' views of risks to improve communication efforts.*

A new study published this month concludes the tendency of some white males with higher education levels and conservative political and cultural views to have lower risk perceptions of environmental threats is not found among African-American males with similar backgrounds.

The study also finds 69 percent of African-American men and women surveyed about their views on the environment and health risks are either “moderately” or “deeply” concerned about the natural environment.

“An initial examination of our survey results using the characteristics similar to those identified in previous studies of the White Male Effect (WME) — namely males who place a high degree of trust in experts and authority figures, who possess an above average level of education, and identify with a conservative political orientation — did not yield a group of African-Americans that perceived risks in a similar fashion to the men characterized by the WME,” the authors conclude.

The study, “Beyond a Simple Case of Black and White: Searching for the White Male Effect in the African-American Community,” was conducted by three experts, Louie Rivers and Joseph Arvai of Michigan State University, and Paul Slovic of Decision Research in Eugene, Oregon. The findings appear in the January 2010 issue of the journal *Risk Analysis*, published by the Society for Risk Analysis.

The authors used the survey results to examine the factors driving risk perception in the African-American community. They hypothesized African-American males with backgrounds and worldviews similar to their white counterparts also would share the latter group's tendency to hold lower perceptions of environmental and health risks compared to the broader public. The WME is considered important because a number of policymakers and managers in society fit these demographic criteria and thus may have views on risks inconsistent with the public at large.

The results from another part of the study, which included both African-American men and women, “. . . challenge the anecdotal, yet increasingly pervasive, suggestion that African-Americans — especially those who live in urban and suburban areas (where our samples were drawn) — have become largely unconcerned about, and disassociated from, the natural environment,” according to the authors. The study was not based on a random sample but a sample of convenience. However, it drew from a regionally diverse population involving 403 respondents alerted through announcements in regions including Ohio, North Carolina, Maryland and Kentucky.

In terms of specific findings, the research concludes black men tend to have lower risk perceptions about environmental and health issues than black women, and that age, education, trust in authority, sense of control, and political orientation also are not correlated with their both men and women’s levels of risk perception.

The authors conclude “careful research about the drivers of risk perceptions in minority communities is a necessary step in crafting more effective risk communication efforts.”

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