

May/June 1999

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The Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard Health News Index is designed to help the news media and people in the health field gain a better understanding of which health stories in the news Americans are following and what they understand about those health issues. Every two months, Kaiser/Harvard issues a new index report. This eighteenth report is based on a survey of 1,000 American adults. The survey asked respondents about major health issues covered in the news between May 1-31, 1999. For comparison purposes, respondents were also asked about other leading issues in the news during the same period.

HEALTH NEWS STORIES FOLLOWED BY THE PUBLIC

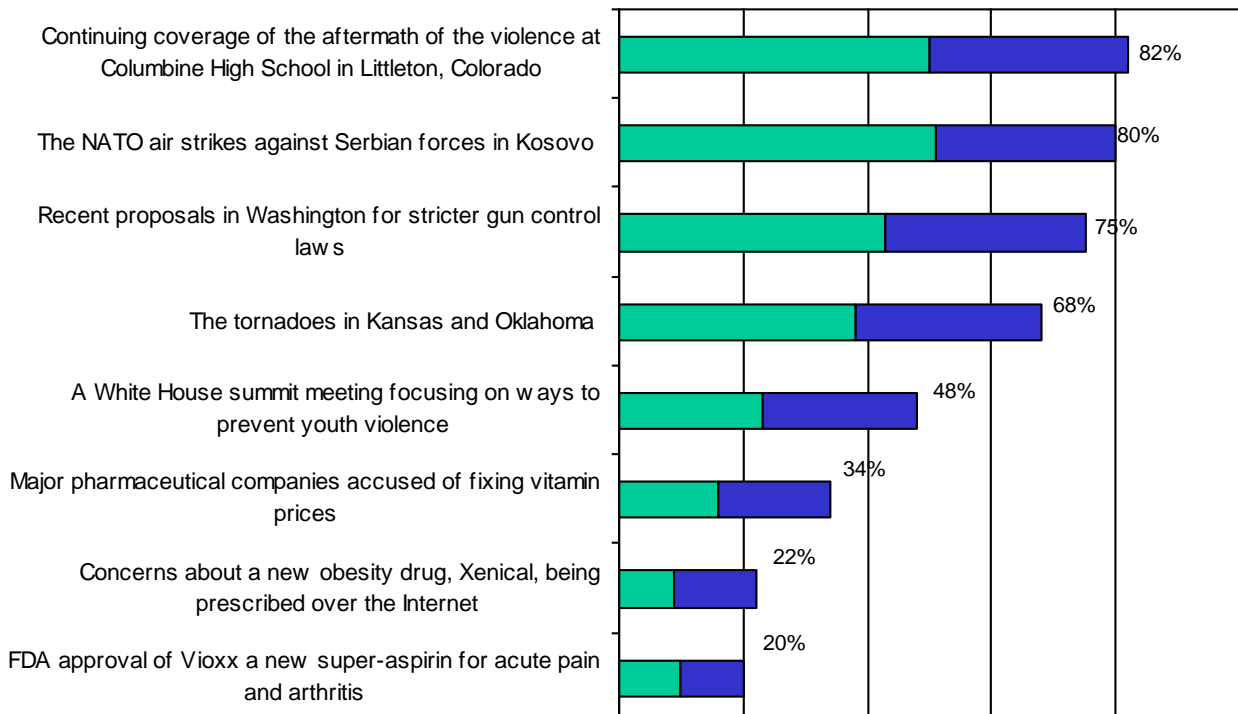
The health news story followed most closely by Americans in May was the recent proposals in Washington for stricter gun control laws (followed very or fairly closely by 75% of the American people).

By comparison, 82% closely followed the continuing coverage of the aftermath of the violence at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. Four out of five (80%) were closely following the NATO air strikes against Serbian forces in Kosovo .

Possibly as a result of attention to the Columbine incident, 48% of Americans closely followed the White House summit on youth violence. Among other health issues in the news, just over a third of Americans (34%) closely followed news about major pharmaceutical companies accused of fixing vitamin prices. About one in five (22%) said they followed stories about Xenical, a new obesity drug being prescribed over the Internet. About the same number (20%) were following accounts of the FDA approval of Vioxx, a new super-aspirin for acute pain and arthritis.

THE KAISER/HARVARD HEALTH NEWS INDEX

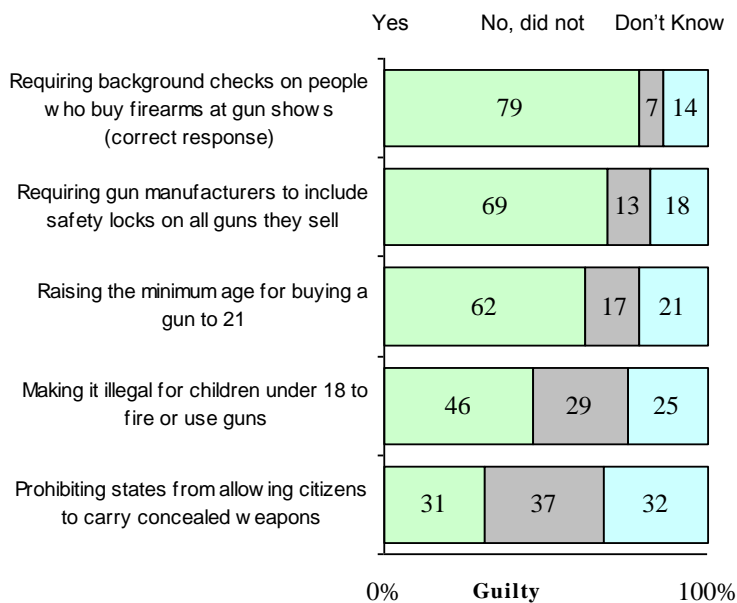
How closely Americans followed leading stories in the news from May 1 to May 31, 1999



WHAT THE PUBLIC UNDERSTANDS ABOUT HEALTH STORIES IN THE NEWS

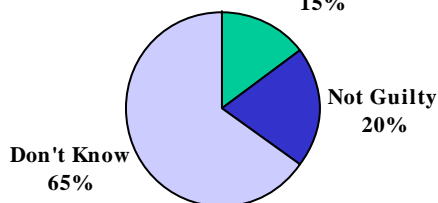
Gun Control and Youth Violence

Most Americans closely followed continuing news coverage of the aftermath of the violence at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado and subsequent proposals in Washington for stricter gun control laws. Most Americans (79%) were aware of the provisions in the Senate gun control bill which would require background checks on people who buy firearms at gun shows. However, 69% mistakenly thought the bill would require gun manufacturers to include safety locks on all guns they sell and 62% thought the bill would raise the minimum age to purchase a gun to 21. Fewer people believed the bill proposed making it illegal for children under 18 to fire or use a gun (46%), or would prohibit states from allowing citizens to carry concealed weapons (31%).

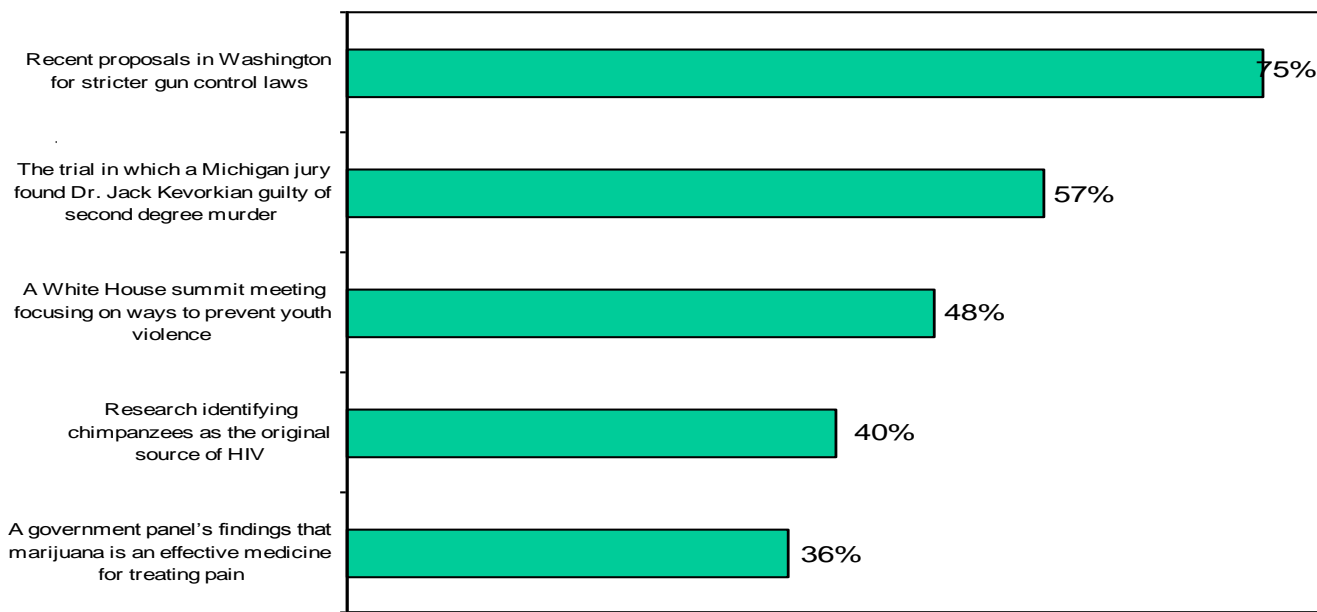


Pharmaceutical Price Fixing

Thirty-four percent of Americans closely followed news reports of the vitamin price fixing accusations against major pharmaceutical companies. However fewer than one in five knew the companies had already agreed to plead guilty to the charges (15%) and that they had agreed to pay the settlement (17%).



Most Closely Followed Health Stories in the First Six Months of 1999



The Kaiser/Harvard Health News Index is based on a national random sample survey of 1,000 Americans conducted June 11-16, 1999 to measure Americans' interest in and knowledge of health stories covered in the news media during the previous month. The survey was designed and analyzed jointly by the staff of the Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University in consultation with the Pew Center for The People and The Press. The survey was conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates. The margin of error is $\leq 3\%$. For additional copies of this report (# ???), please call (800) 656-4533.