

Health professionals are the most trusted source of information on COVID-19

Karin Teske, MPH; John Tsirigotis, MA; Melissa Riba, MS; Jody Platt, MPH, PhD; Marianne Udow-Phillips, MHSA¹

COVID-19 is a recently discovered pathogen, and there is much that is still being learned about this novel coronavirus. Health officials, news outlets, political leaders and social media outlets are all publishing information and recommendations about how to mitigate COVID-19. Both accurate, science based information and misinformation is in wide circulation. Globally, the World Health Organization has developed a [“Mythbusters” site](#) as an attempt to reduce misinformation about COVID-19. Locally, it is important to understand where people are acquiring information about the virus, whom they trust, and how to overcome mistrust and misinformation.

In late May, the Center for Health and Research Transformation (CHRT) and the Department of Learning Health Sciences (LHS) at the University of Michigan asked Michiganders about their sources of COVID-19 information and their perceptions regarding the trustworthiness of those information sources.²

Key Findings

- Most respondents (74 percent) reported worries that misinformation about COVID-19 makes Michiganders less safe.
- There are many sources of information about COVID-19, but there is a significant mismatch between the most-used sources of information and those that are the most trusted.
- Respondents reported their health care provider as the most trusted source of information about COVID-19, but less than half of respondents reported getting information from their health care provider.
- Dr. Anthony Fauci and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) were reported as the most trusted public health officials, but respondents also reported high levels of trust for Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer.
- Compared to official state and national public health sources, county health departments are less frequently used as sources of information about COVID-19 and less likely, overall, to be trusted.
- Respondents reported that the media and the Michigan Legislature are among the least trusted sources of information about COVID-19.

Where respondents get COVID-19 information

In general, respondents most frequently got information^{3,4} about COVID-19 from health officials and Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer. Friends and family members were also common sources of information (Figure 1).

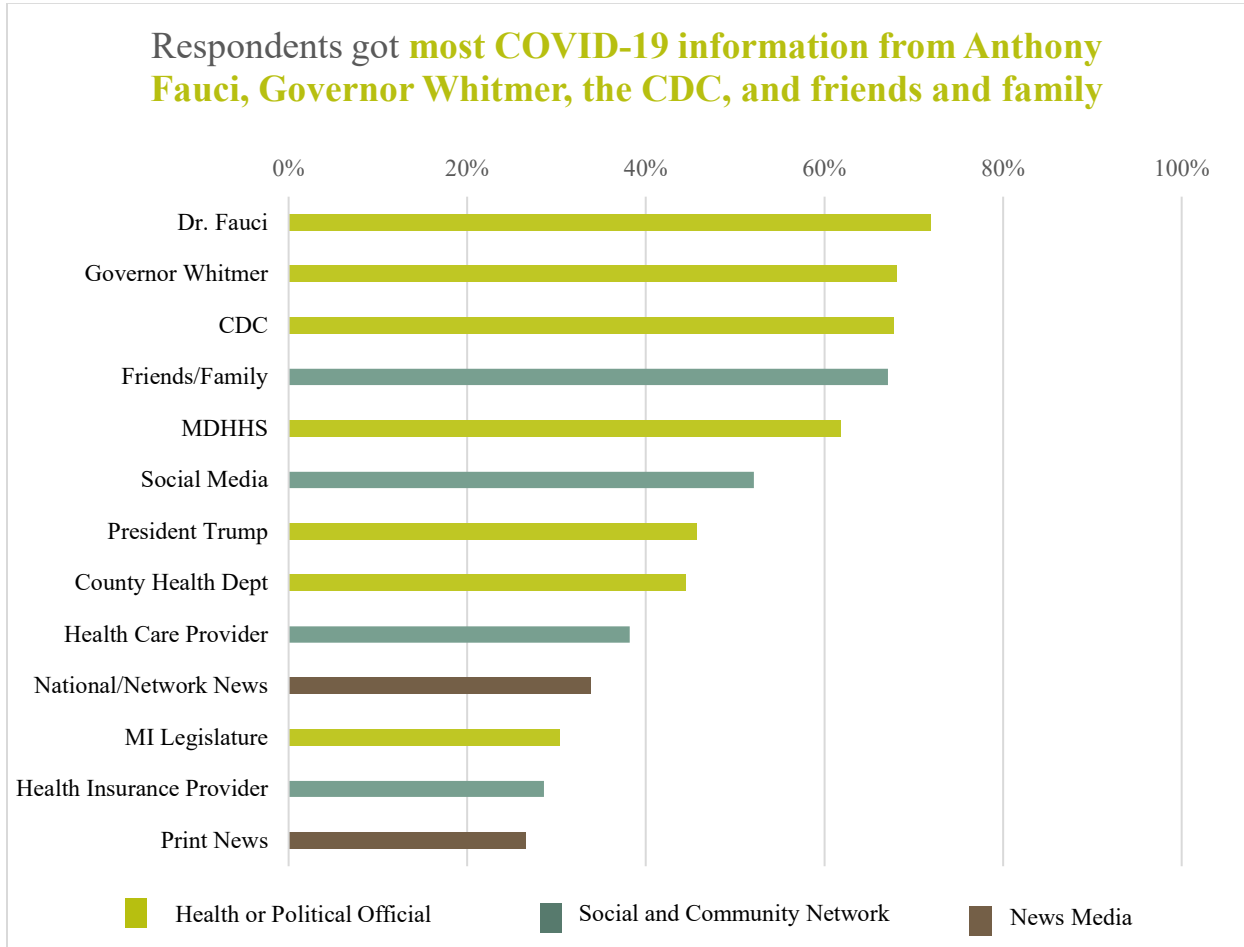
¹ See additional acknowledgments on page five.

² See survey methodology at chrt.org/cover-michigan-survey/methodology.

³ Respondents who indicated that they 'regularly' or 'occasionally' got information about COVID-19 from each source are included in this analysis. Those that indicated that they 'rarely' or 'never' got information about COVID-19 are excluded.

⁴ 'National/Network News' includes ABC News, CBS News, Fox News, and MSNBC News. 'Print News' includes New York Times, Washington Post, Detroit Free Press, Detroit News, and MLive.

Figure 1



Information from health and elected officials

Among official health sources and elected officials, respondents generally reported that they most frequently got information about COVID-19 from Dr. Anthony Fauci (72 percent), the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (68 percent), and Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer (68 percent).

Respondents were far less likely to have gotten information from the Michigan Legislature (30 percent) or U.S. President Donald Trump (46 percent). Compared to official health sources at the state and national level, such as the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS), respondents got information about COVID-19 from their local county health departments less frequently.

Social and community networks

Within social and community networks, about two in every three respondents reported getting information about COVID-19 from friends and family members (67 percent). Just over half reported getting information from social media (52 percent), and about two in five (38 percent) reported getting information from their health care provider. Respondents were least likely to get information from their health insurance provider (29 percent).

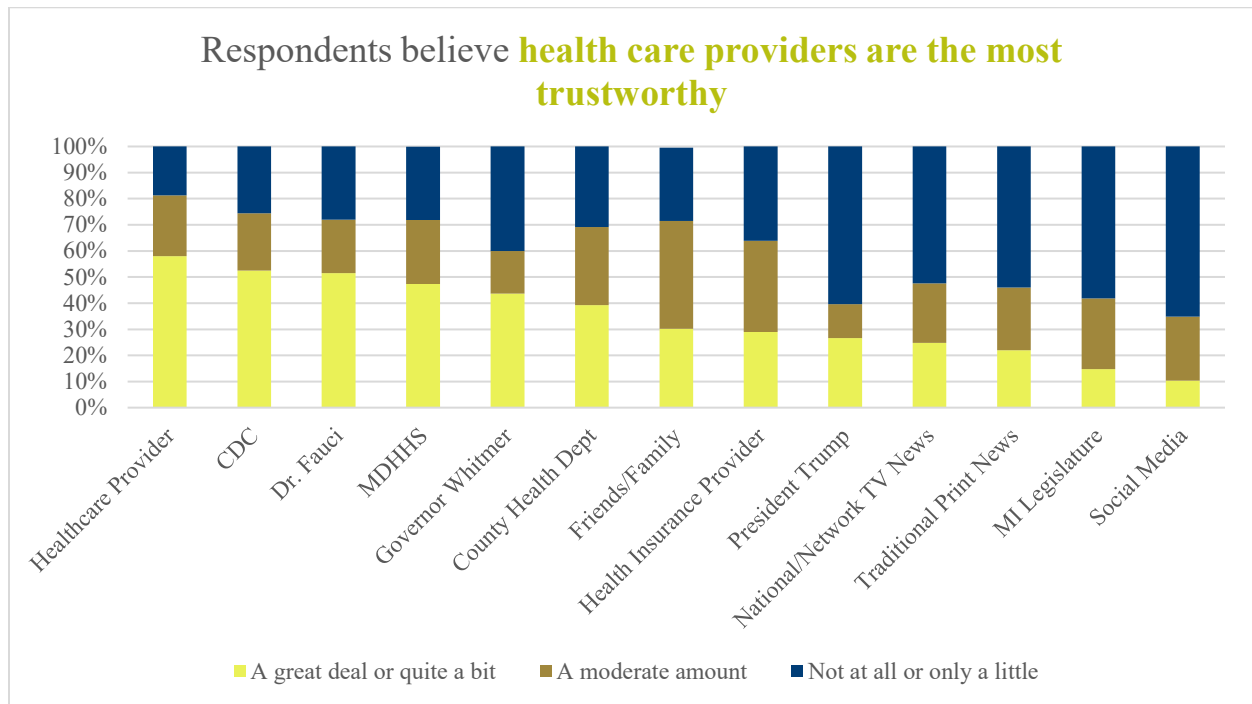
News media

The news media overall⁵ were among the sources least frequently used for information about COVID-19. Among respondents, the most common news media sources of information about COVID-19 were Fox News (38 percent) and ABC News (37 percent). The least common sources of information from national news sources were MSNBC (26 percent), the New York Times (29 percent), and the Washington Post (29 percent).⁶

How much respondents trust specific information sources

Trust in information about COVID-19⁷ varies by source and differs from the most common sources of information. While only 38 percent of respondents reported getting information from their health care providers, for example, health care providers were the most trusted source of information. Conversely, while over half of respondents (52 percent) obtained information through social media, social media was the least trusted source (Figure 2).

Figure 2



Health and elected officials

Overall, national health officials and Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer were among the most trusted sources of information about COVID-19. Among the least trusted sources of information were President Donald Trump and the

⁵Respondents were asked to choose from a short list of common national and local news outlets. The Daily Show/Colbert Report, the Rush Limbaugh Show, and the Lansing State Journal were omitted from analysis as they were all statistical outliers.

⁶Respondents also sought out COVID-19 information from CBS News (34%), MLive (29%), Detroit Free Press (24%), and Detroit News (22%). Excluded from analysis were The Colbert Report/Daily Show (16%), the Rush Limbaugh Show (15%), and the Lansing State Journal (11%).

⁷Question was worded: "Regardless of how often you get information from these sources, how much do you trust information provided about the coronavirus outbreak by each of the following?"

Michigan Legislature. Over two-thirds of respondents reported at least a moderate amount of trust in their county public health department; however, county health departments overall were less trusted than state (MDHHS) and national (CDC) public health sources.

Social and community networks

Health care providers were among the most trusted sources of information about COVID-19, with about 80 percent of respondents reporting at least a moderate amount of trust in them. The least trusted social and community network source of information about COVID-19 was social media.

National and local news outlets

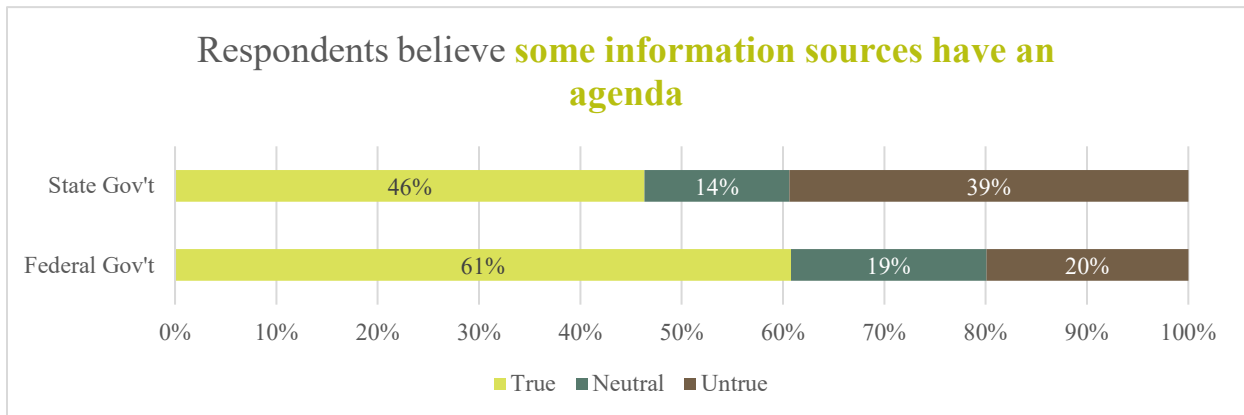
Michigan respondents reported general distrust of the news media for COVID-19 information. The difference in trust for different types of national news outlets was marginal, ranging from 28 percent trust of ABC News to 22 percent trust of Fox News. MSNBC was about as trusted as Fox News.⁸

Concerns about misinformation

Respondents were more skeptical of the federal government than state government.

More than half of respondents (61 percent) reported their belief that the federal government has an agenda that is causing it to not give the whole story to the public whereas less than half (46 percent) believed the same about the state government^{7,8} (Figure 3).

Figure 3



Most respondents (74 percent) reported worries that misinformation about COVID-19 is making people less safe (Figure 4).

⁸Trust 'a great deal' or 'quite a bit': ABC News (28%), CBS News (25%), New York Times (25%), The Washington Post (24%), MSNBC (23%), Fox News (22%), Detroit Free Press (22%), Detroit News (20%), and MLive (19%). Excluded from analysis for being statistical outliers: The Daily Show/Colbert Report (14%), Lansing State Journal (14%), and the Rush Limbaugh Show (13%).

Figure 4



Conclusion

There are many sources of information about COVID-19, but there is also a significant mismatch between the most-used sources of information and those that are the most trusted. This dynamic will continue to present communications challenges for policymakers, experts, and public health officials as the pandemic and pandemic response evolve.

Health care providers were reported as the most trusted source of information about COVID-19 but were less likely to be a source of information, with less than half of respondents getting information from their health care provider. One reason may be that people are simply not interacting with their health care providers on a frequent or occasional basis right now. Providers may also not have sufficient information at their disposal to be able to dispense up-to-date guidance to their patients, or if they do, they may not have adequate channels to share information with their patient population as a whole.

Most Michiganders surveyed reported getting and trusting COVID-19 information from health professionals at the national level such as Dr. Anthony Fauci or the U.S. Centers for Disease Control. Public health officials overall were among the most trusted sources of information about COVID-19, and uniquely as an elected official, Governor Whitmer broke into that rank. Compared to official state and national health sources such as the CDC and MDHHS, county health departments were less frequently used as sources of information about COVID-19 and less likely, overall, to be trusted.

Michiganders generally have concerns about the completeness and accuracy of information about COVID-19, and they worry that misinformation is making people less safe. Despite the ubiquitous nature of the 24/7 news cycle, neither traditional nor digital news media were broadly trusted as messengers, and while social media was a significant source of COVID-19 information, only a minority of respondents reported getting COVID-19 information from the traditional news media.

Trust in information is critical, but the disconnect between high trust and simultaneous low use of information sources will challenge public policymakers and health practitioners, requiring diligence in selecting the messengers, channels, and platforms that resonate best with Michigan residents as the state moves into the next phase of pandemic response.

With gratitude for the contributions of Paige Nong, doctoral student; Phillip Amara, MPH, MS; and Minakshi Raj, MPH, PhD