

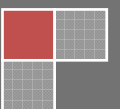
2010

# A Survey on Environmental Health Issues in the Bronx

October 2010

The Bronx Health Link

Joann Casado and Robert Lederer



# **A Survey on Environmental Health Issues in the Bronx**

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# About The Bronx Health Link, Inc.

The Bronx Health Link, Inc. (TBHL) is a unique collaboration created in 1998. The vision was to build an organization that addresses community concerns by creating linkages between the different providers, organizations, coalitions and stakeholders that serve Bronx communities. The goal of TBHL is to create a platform for the involvement of residents and other stakeholders in public health planning, programming and decision-making, TBHL currently works with over 150 community organizations and providers. While TBHL serves the entire borough, the focus is on low-income neighborhoods with the highest risk for poor health outcomes, many located in the 16<sup>th</sup> Congressional District, the poorest Congressional District in the entire United States.

The Bronx Health Link, Inc. is an organization that serves as a clearinghouse for the members of the health and human service delivery system of the Bronx. In this capacity, we reach over 1000 members and agencies that actively participate in an electronic mailing list and numerous workgroups, advisory boards and task forces. We work extensively with the community and health care providers with the aim of improving birth outcomes, prenatal care and the reproductive health of women in the Bronx.

Copies of this report can be downloaded at [www.bronxhealthlink.org](http://www.bronxhealthlink.org) or obtained by calling the Bronx Health Link at (718) 590-8512 or emailing [bob@bronxhealthlink.org](mailto:bob@bronxhealthlink.org).

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# Acknowledgements

This report was prepared by The Bronx Health Link staff, including Joann Casado, Executive Director, and Robert Lederer, Researcher and Policy Analyst. The Bronx Environmental Issues Survey was developed, administered, and tabulated with the assistance of Diana Cabrera, Janelle Scarlett, and Rita Cordova.

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# Introduction

As an agency that works to improve the health of Bronx residents, the Bronx Health Link has become increasingly aware of the growing evidence that environmental exposures have a damaging effect on health in this borough. Due to our particular work to improve birth outcomes, we are particularly concerned about the health of women, infants and families.

In the process of researching a report on the impact of environmental exposures on maternal and child health in the Bronx, we did not uncover any specific assessment of Bronx residents on these issues. In addition, we wanted to give voice to the community. Therefore, we decided that it would be important to ask the community about their knowledge of and attitudes towards these problems, as well as suggestions for changes in environmental policies and practices. In the summer of 2010 we surveyed 200 Bronx residents and workers as to their environmental knowledge, attitudes, and suggestions.

Although formal research is not our expertise, we developed this survey to provide a snapshot of the level of knowledge of environmental exposure in the community. We could have asked a lot more questions; perhaps our methodology did not comply with the strict guidelines necessary to be published in a peer-reviewed journal, but that was not our goal. We wanted to document what the community thought at a given moment about these issues, and we wanted others to bear witness to their feelings about this very important issue. As we reviewed the surveys, it became apparent that concern about environmental health issues is high, and many of the respondents had a variety of suggestions for how to improve the borough's environment. The results suggest that to address the broad interest on this issue, community-based organizations, providers and academics have a responsibility to engage in community education, research and policy advocacy with the borough's residents on these issues.

In the coming year, The Bronx Health Link intends to use the findings of this survey and our broader report to develop an agenda for advocacy to strengthen environmental policy as it affects the Bronx. We welcome your participation in this vital work.

# Methods and Summary of Findings

We developed a printed questionnaire consisting of 20 questions that required, on average, about 10 minutes to answer. After a pilot test and further refinement of the instrument, staff of The Bronx Health Link went to a series of venues during May and June of this year to administer the survey to 200 people. Those locations included two of the agency's conferences on MCH issues attended by human service providers and consumers from around the Bronx; a major community health fair held in our building in the South Bronx; prospective jurors at the South Bronx courthouse; and a meeting of the agency's Consumer Advisory Group, composed of mothers who live in the South Bronx.

Participants were asked to fill out the written survey and were given a roundtrip MetroCard upon return of the completed form. Those targeted for the request were people 13 or older who were invited to proceed if they said they either lived or worked in the Bronx. (The full set of survey questions and responses follows this summary.)

***Only 39% of those to whom the question applied reported receiving information on environmental risks during pregnancy from their medical provider.***

Broadly, the survey had the following results:

- 58% of the respondents – 87% of whom were Latino(a), African American, or Asian – ranked the Bronx's environmental quality as low or very low.
- Only 39% of those to whom the question applied reported receiving information on environmental risks during pregnancy from their medical provider.
- Majorities ranging from 59-94% correctly answered factual questions about connections between toxic substances and health effects on women and children (although on some questions, up to 35% checked "don't know.")
- 58-70% reported that they had learned about environmental issues in the Bronx from newspapers or television.
- 67% of respondents had specific suggestions on actions that they said should be taken to improve the environment in the Bronx for pregnant women, babies, and the community.

While this survey was not a strictly scientific sample, it gives a strong indication that there is a high level of concern among those who live and work in the Bronx that there are serious environmental problems, particularly air pollution. Many people have a basic familiarity with some of the facts about how toxic substances affect maternal and child health, but there are significant gaps. Finally, there is a high degree of concern, and many opinions and ideas about the measures needed to improve the environment. These results clearly indicate the potential for focused efforts aimed at community education and advocacy, as well as increased training of health care providers.

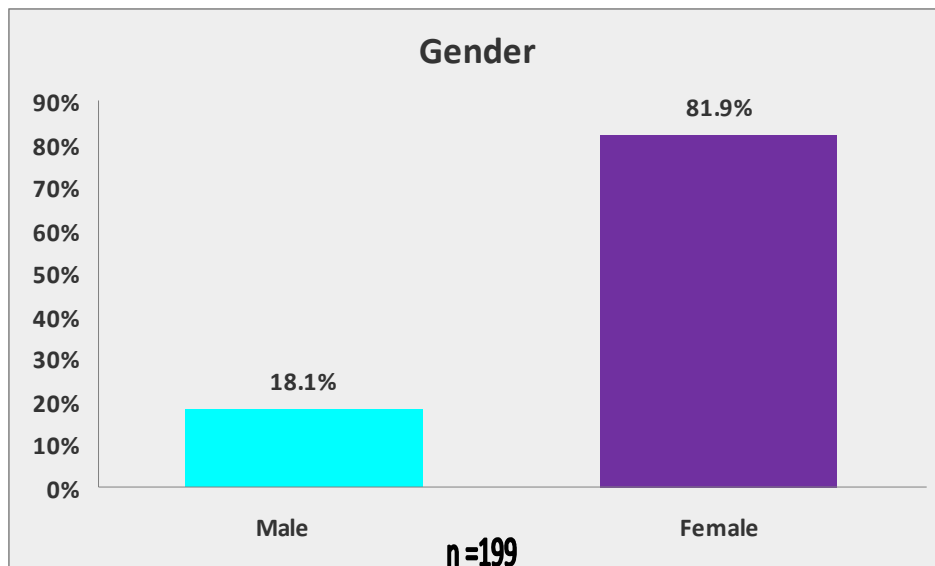
# Detailed Tabulation of Responses

What follows is a tabulation of the results for all the questions asked in the Bronx Environmental Issues Survey. The survey was completed by all 200 of the participants, although some skipped particular questions. The “n” for each graph represents the number who completed that particular question.

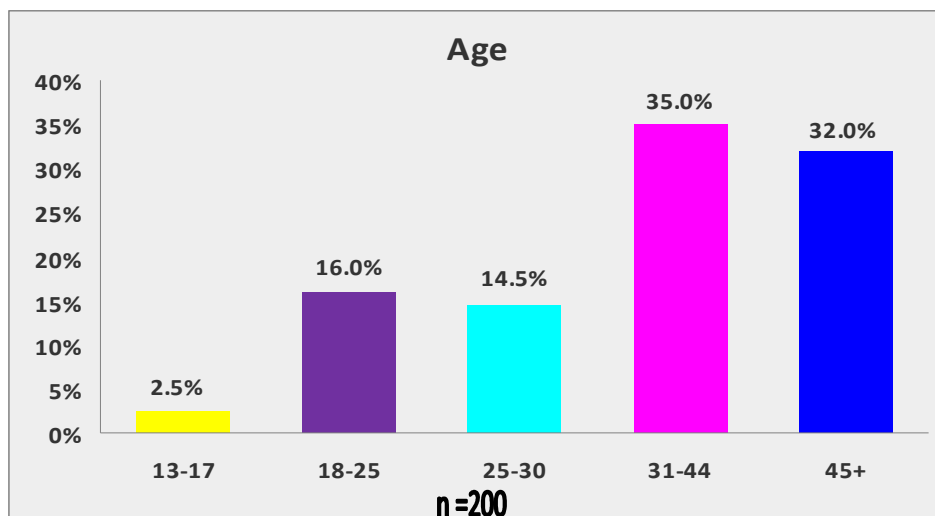
## Demographics

The first six questions concerned the personal characteristics of the respondent. The demographics of the 200 survey participants were as follows:

In terms of gender, the vast majority (82%) were women (versus 18% men).

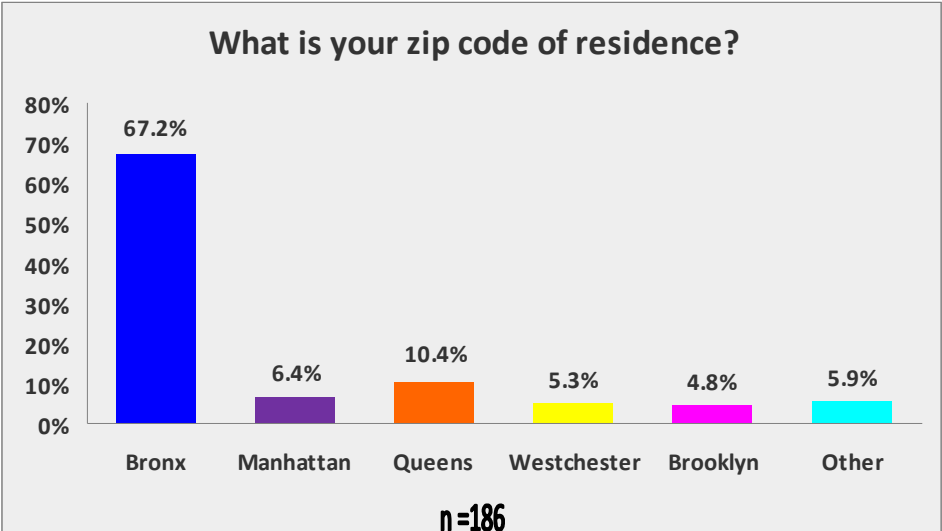


The age distribution of respondents was such that 67% were over the age of 30.

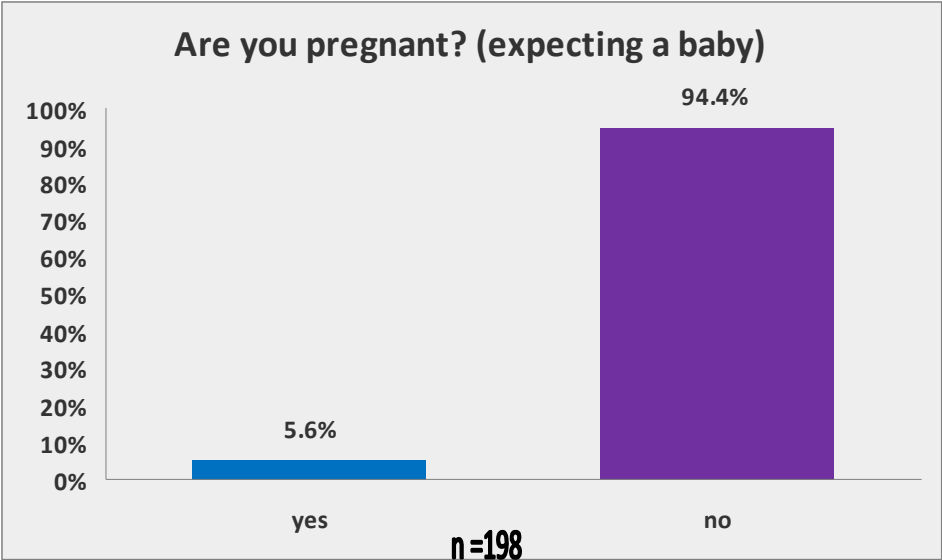




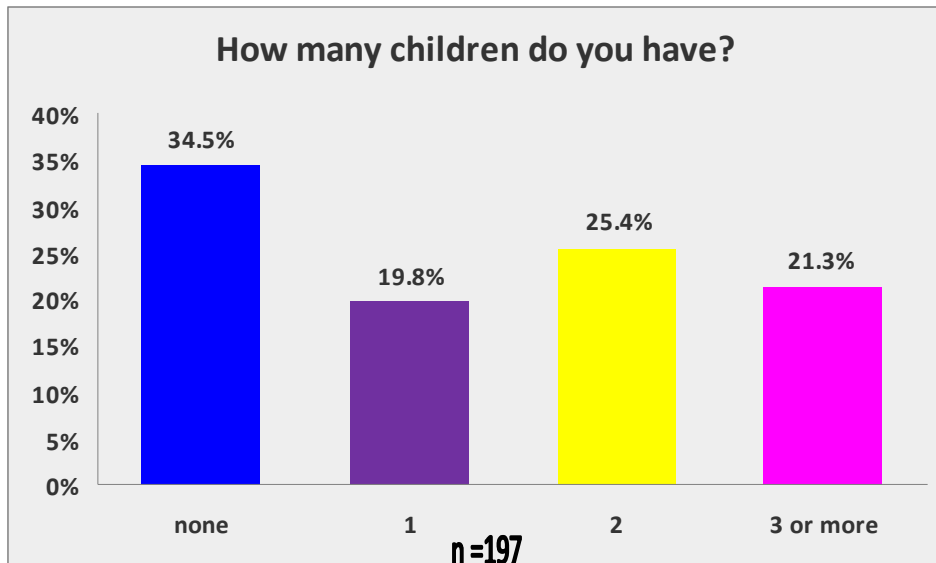
When asked their zip code of residence, the vast majority (67%) gave Bronx zip codes, while 10% listed locations in Manhattan, and 23% in other areas.



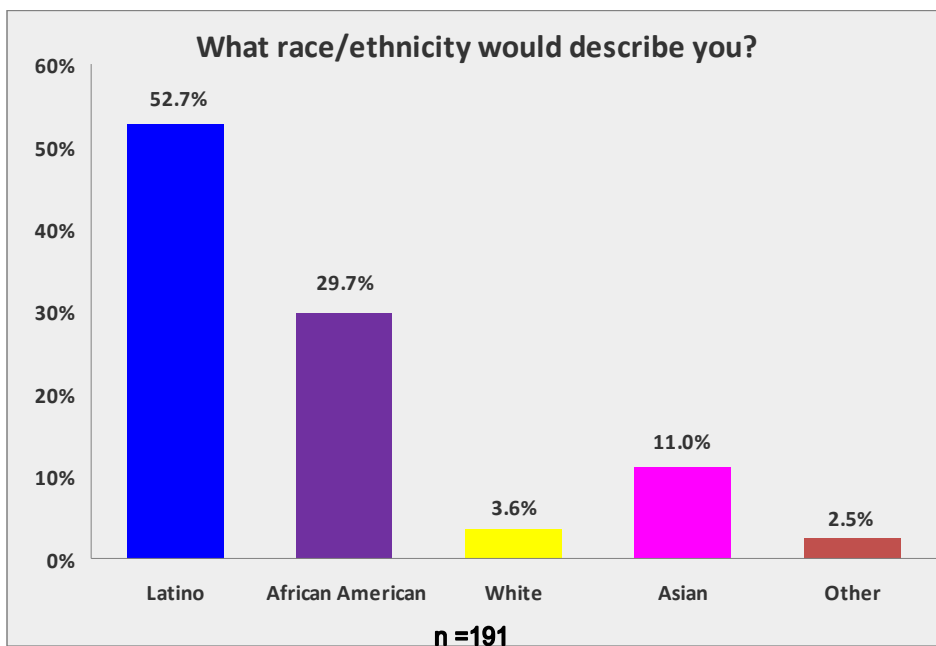
In terms of pregnancy status, 6% of respondents were either pregnant or expecting a baby (respondent to this question could be either a woman or man).



The majority of respondents (65%) reported that they had one or more children, while 35% said they had no children.



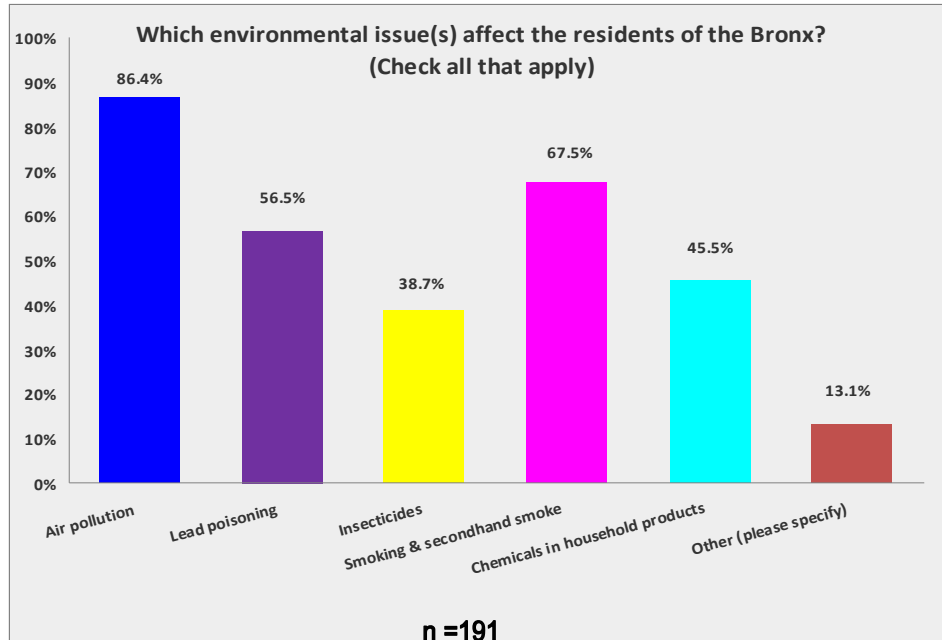
Self-identified race/ethnicity was an open-ended question, so there were many different types of responses, but 87% indicated a non-European origin. The majority (53%) designated Latino, Hispanic or a specific Latin American country. Next highest was Black or African American, at 30%, followed by much lower numbers of self-reported Asians, white, and others.



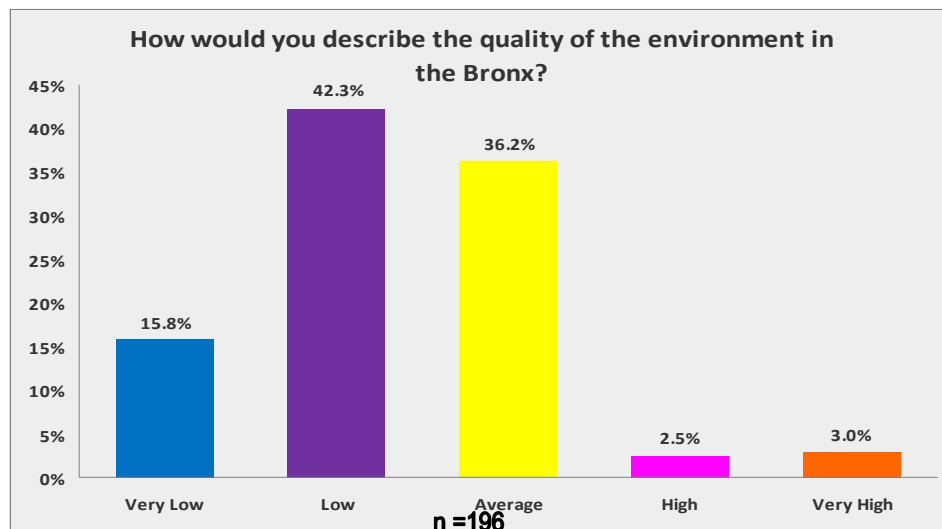
## Attitudes and Knowledge about Environmental Issues

The next set of questions asked about the respondent's attitudes, opinions, and knowledge about environmental issues, both in general and in the Bronx in particular.

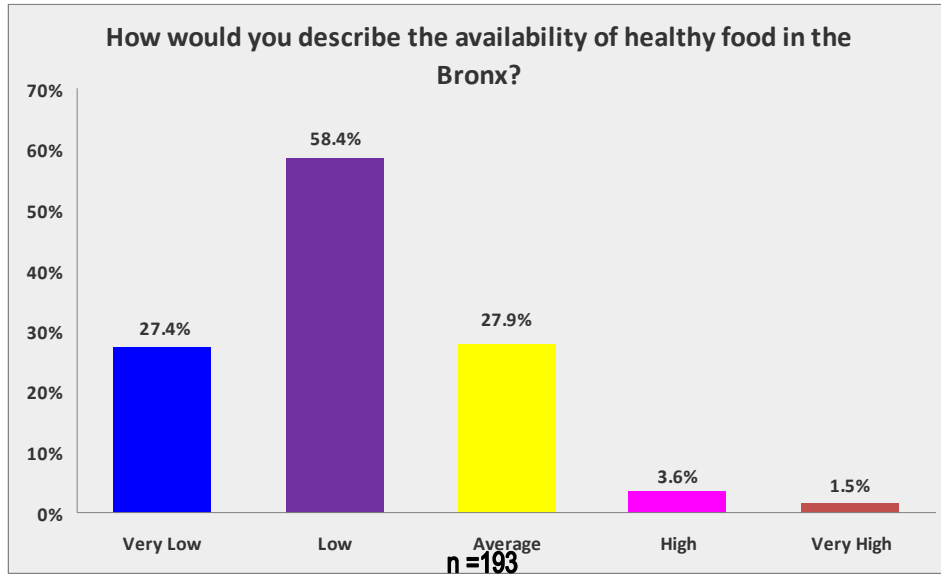
When asked, "Which environmental issue(s) affect the residents of the Bronx?" with the option to check multiple options and add their own, the largest majority (87%) chose air pollution, followed by smoking and secondhand smoke (68%) and lead poisoning (57%). Among the "other" responses, the largest numbers cited dirty streets and unhealthy food options.



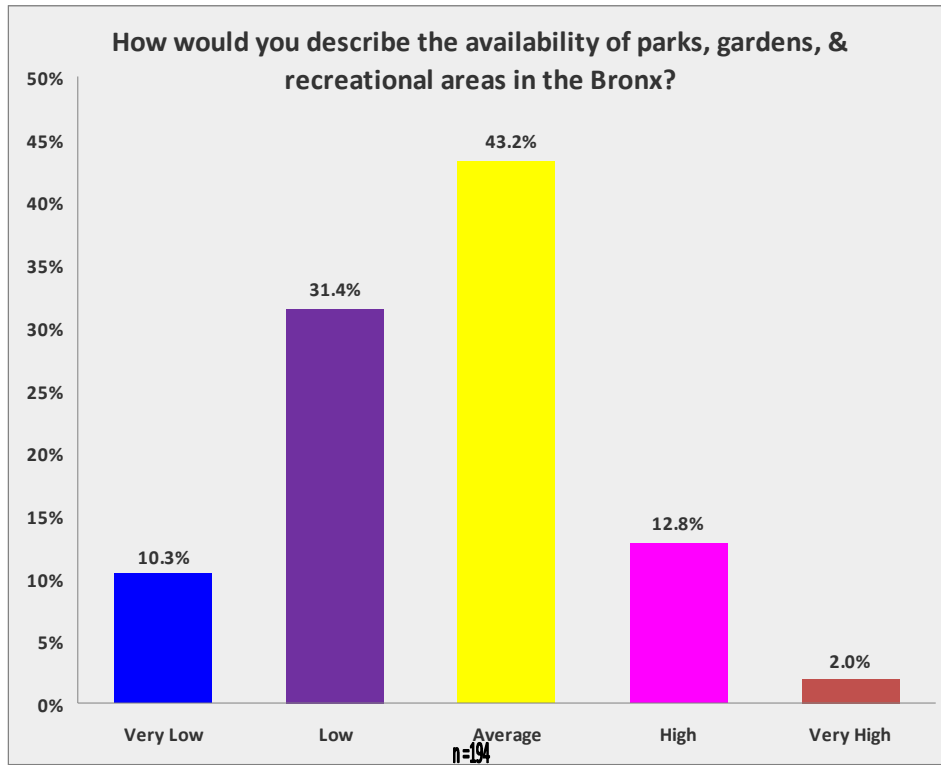
When asked their opinion of several environmental issues in the Bronx, a majority (58%) said they would "describe the quality of the environment in the Bronx" as "very low" or "low", with 36% choosing "average" and only 6% rating it "high" or "very high."



Even larger numbers gave the borough low marks on “the availability of healthy food”: 67% selected “very low” or “low,” 28% selected “average,” and 6% selected “high” or “very high.”



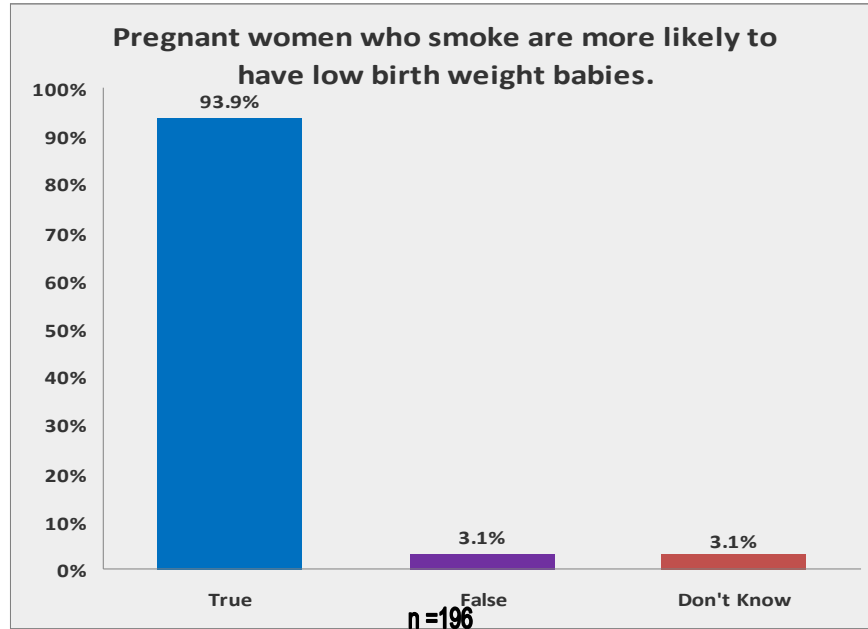
Only on the question of “the availability of parks, gardens, and recreational areas” did the majority give at least somewhat favorable ratings: 43% “average,” 15% “high” or “very high” and 41% “low” or “very low.”



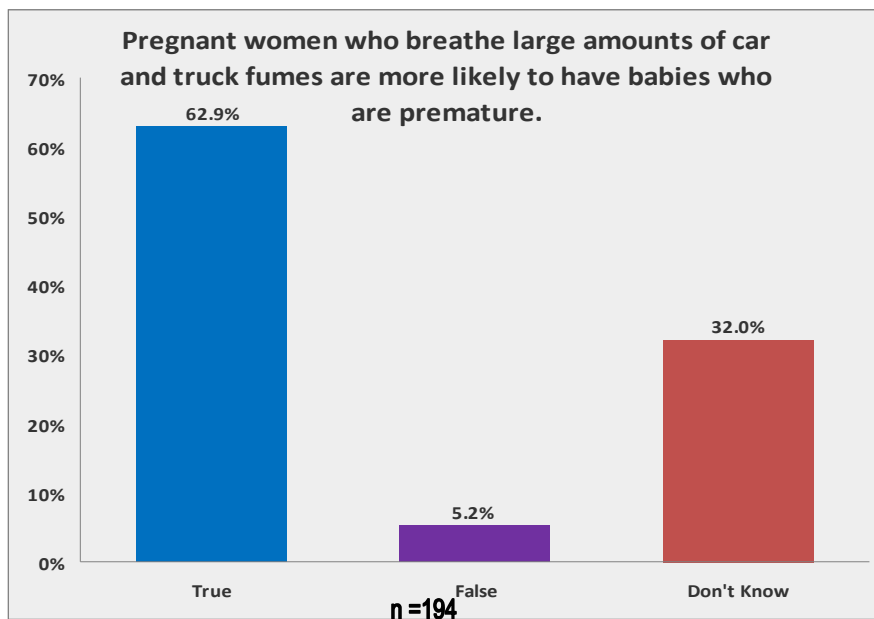
Majorities correctly answered the seven questions seeking to determine environmental knowledge, but there were large numbers of “don't know” responses (31-35%) for questions about BPA, air pollution, and insecticides.

Results were as follows (all questions are correctly answered “true”):

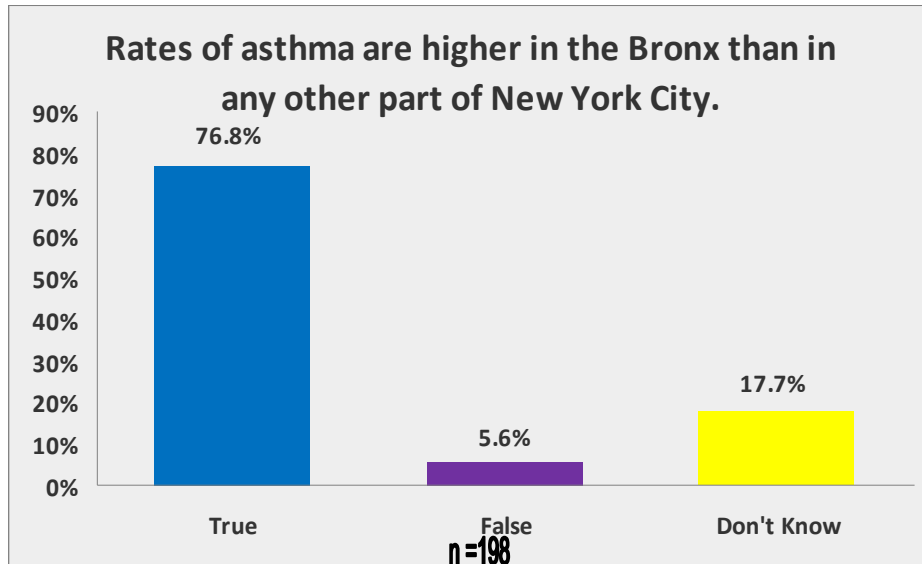
- Pregnant women who smoke are more likely to have low birth weight babies.  
True – 94% False - 3% Don't Know - 3%



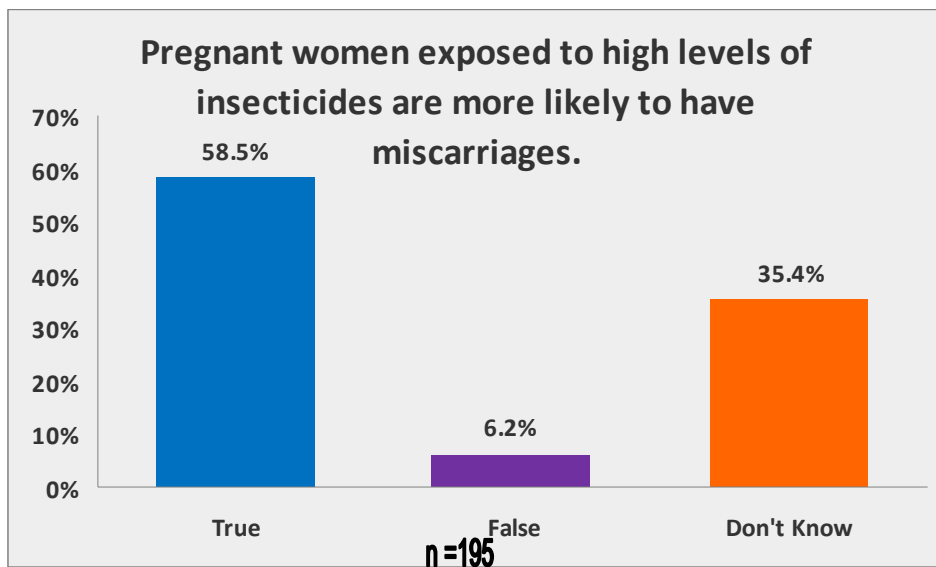
- Pregnant women who breathe large amounts of car and truck fumes are more likely to have babies who are premature.  
True - 63% False - 5% Don't Know - 32%



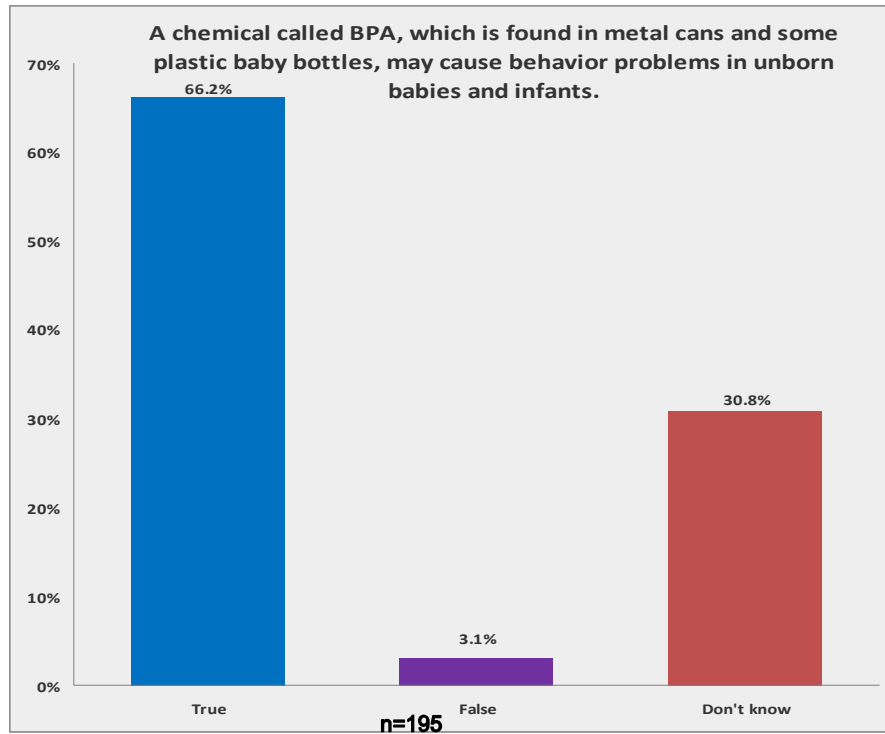
- Rates of asthma are higher in the Bronx than in any other part of New York City.  
True - 77% False - 6% Don't Know - 18%



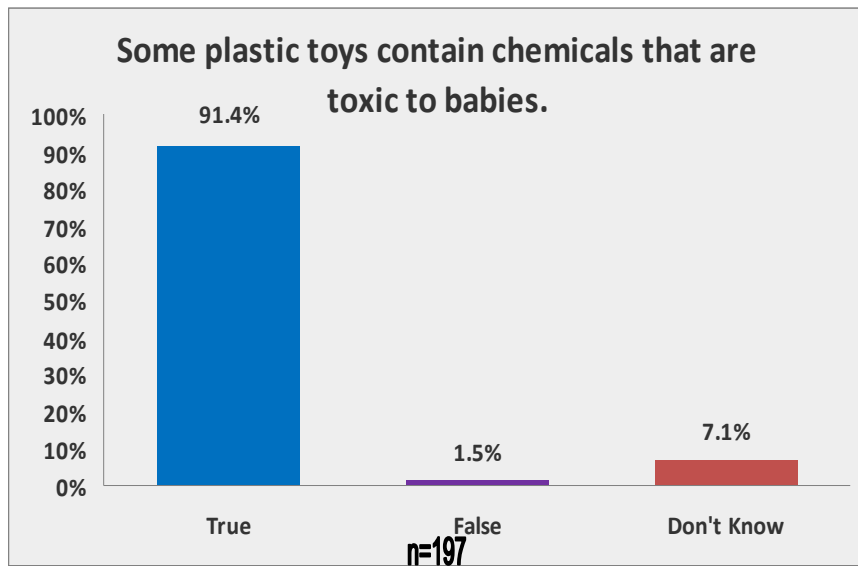
- Pregnant women exposed to high levels of insecticides are more likely to have miscarriages.  
True - 59% False - 6% Don't Know - 35%



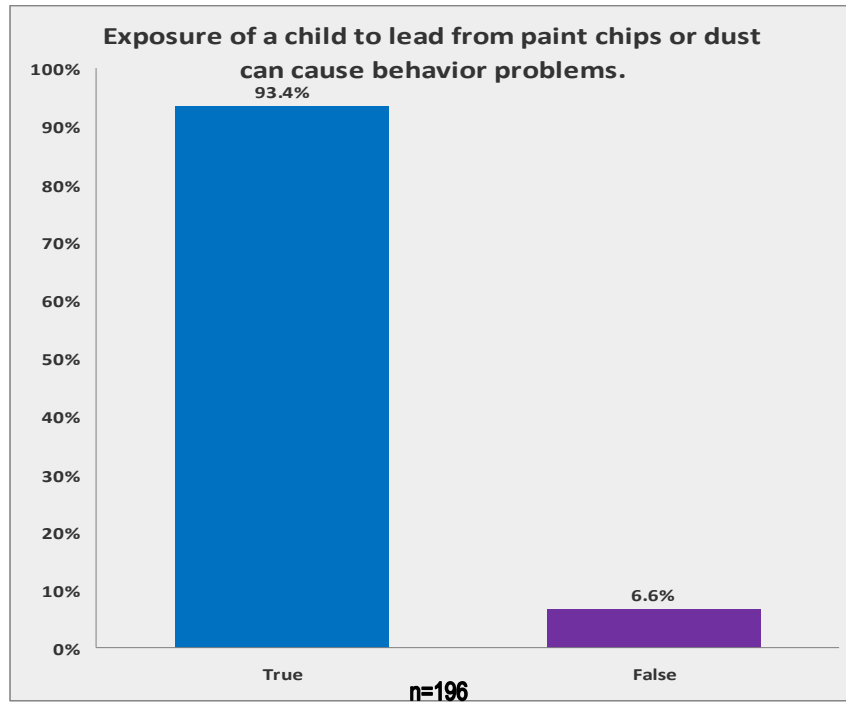
- A chemical called BPA, which is found in metal cans and some plastic baby bottles, may cause behavior problems in unborn babies and infants.  
True - 66% False - 3% Don't know - 31%



- Some plastic toys contain chemicals that are toxic to babies.  
True - 91% False - 2% Don't Know - 7%

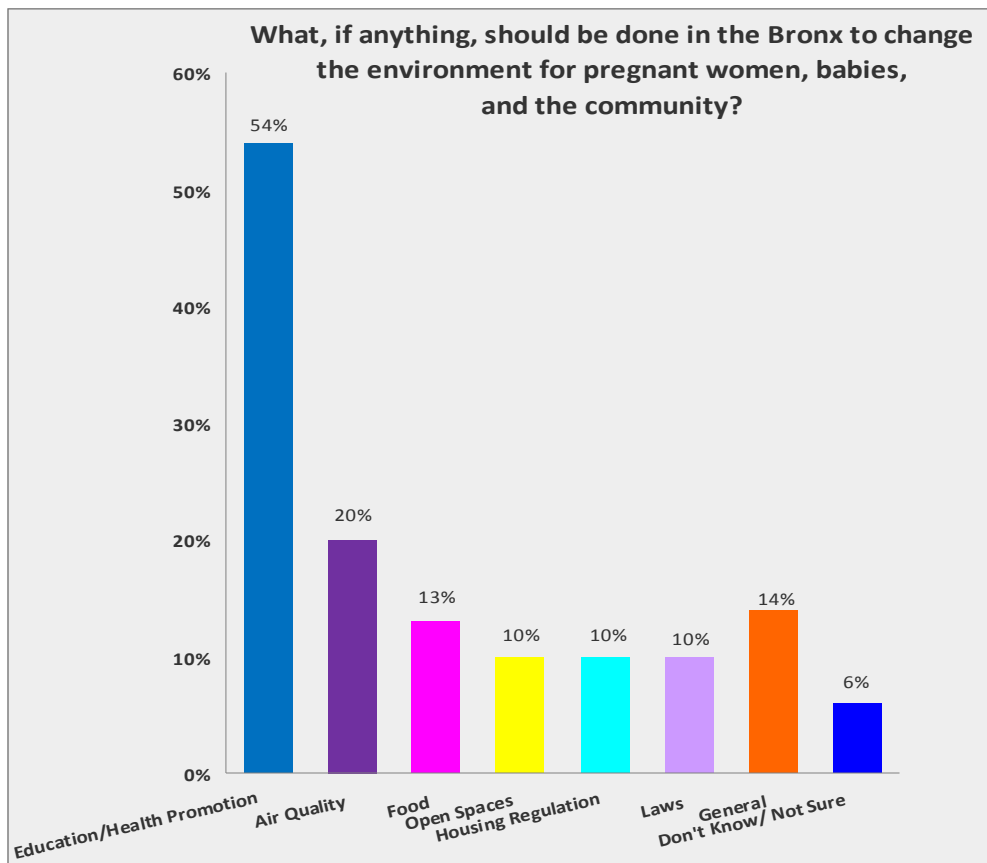


- Exposure of a child to lead from paint chips or dust can cause behavior problems.  
True - 93%    False - 7%



When asked the open-ended question, "What, if anything, should be done in the Bronx to change the environment for pregnant women, babies, and the community?" 135 (67%) of the respondents wrote an answer, and they had a wide range of suggestions.





The largest proportion of respondents (54% of those answering this question) put forth ideas relating to health promotion and education. Among the ideas were:

- “Flyers in building or posters around regarding what affects your health - pollution, smoking, nutrition, etc.”
- “Community outreach to populations who are second-language learners - immigrant families”
- “Provide more funds to agencies to service these communities in need.”
- “More workshops, public service announcements, visits to schools senior centers, churches”
- “Pregnant women need to be informed from all media and their health providers on environmental risks.”
- “Survey young mothers regarding the status of their living conditions and the quality of their food.”

Next highest were ideas in the category of air quality (20%); suggestions included:

- “The fumes in the Bronx, especially Hunts Point - too many industrial companies.”
- “Find ways to relieve the undue burden of commercial traffic on the Bronx.”
- “Tougher regulations for idling cars and diesel fuel trucks.”
- “More ‘No Smoking Allowed’ areas”

Requests for greater access to healthy foods and nutrition were made by 13%. Among the ideas:

- “Giving additional funds to them to buy healthier food which tends to be more expensive or paid transportation to take them to street fruit markets.”
- “Create more year-round green markets and have the city government incentivize grocery stores to develop in the Bronx.”
- “Provide more healthy foods, more green markets.”
- “Increase access to local natural foods - farmers market that accept food stamps and WIC”

Calls for stronger laws and environmental enforcement were made by 10%, including:

- “Remove harmful chemicals from our environment.”
- “Big business needs to be held accountable for their responsibility in environmental issues.”
- “Tougher restrictions on over-the-counter pesticide sales.”

Another 10% made requests for more parks and green spaces, including such ideas as:

- “Plant more trees” (echoed by numerous respondents)
- “Advocate and petition for more green space and play areas for children.”

Finally, 14% made general suggestions for environmental improvement, including:

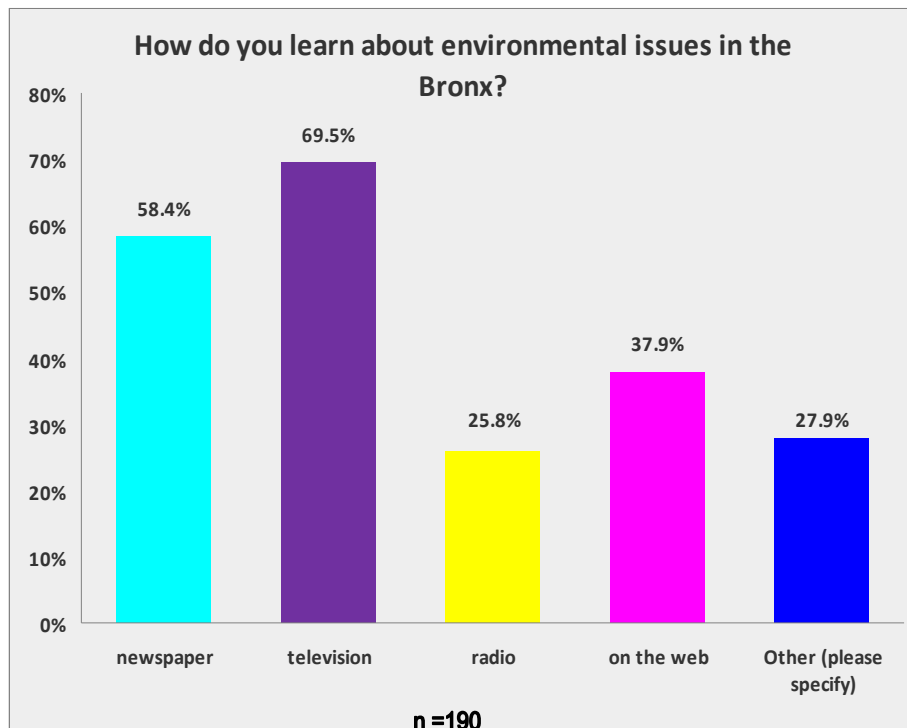
- “Cleaning everything that needs to be cleaned up.”
- “Get our politicians to address the problem.”

- “Political intervention and advocacy work at grassroots level to educate and provoke bottom-up change”
- “Coalitions are key - environmental organizations to work together to address issues, community advisory and organizing.”

### Sources of Information on Environmental Issues

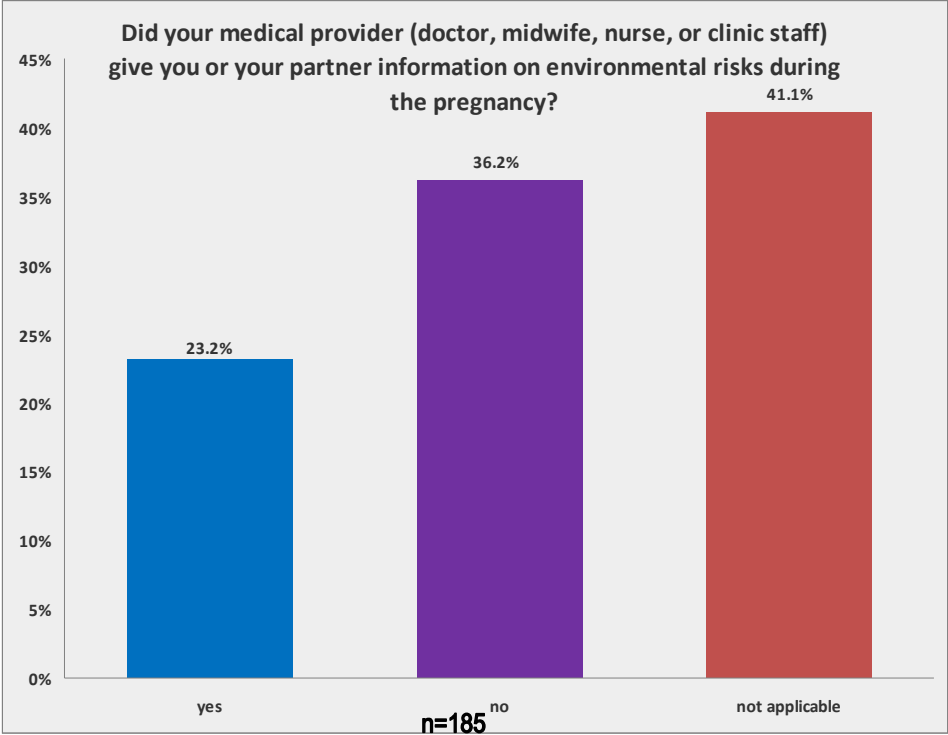
The final two questions attempted to determine the respondent’s sources of information on environmental issues.

Asked “How do you learn about environmental issues in the Bronx?” (with options to check more than one response), majorities listed television (70%) and newspaper (58%), followed by “on the web” (38%) and radio (26%). Another 28% added other sources.



Of those who wrote a response in the “other” category, 35% listed their employment, 30% wrote “word of mouth” or a variant, and much smaller percentages gave replies in the categories of education, personal observations, professional media, or “don’t know.”

To the question, “Did your medical provider (doctor, midwife, nurse, or clinic staff) give you or your partner information on environmental risks during the pregnancy?” 41% responded that this was not applicable to them. Of the remainder, 39% said “yes” and 61% said “no.”



# Survey Questions

**1. Gender:**

- Male
- Female

**2. Age:**

- 13-17
- 18-25
- 25-30
- 31-44
- 45+

**3. What is your zip code of residence?**

**4. Are you pregnant? (expecting a baby)**

- yes
- no

**5. How many children do you have?**

- none
- 1
- 2
- 3 or more

**6. What race/ethnicity would describe you?**

**7. Which environmental issue(s) affect the residents of the Bronx? (Check all that apply)**

- Air pollution
- Lead poisoning
- Insecticides
- Smoking & secondhand smoke
- Chemicals in household products
- Other (please specify)

8. Please give your opinion on each of the following environmental issues:

	Very Low	Low	Average	High	Very High
How would you describe the quality of the environment in the Bronx?	<input type="checkbox"/> Very Low	<input type="checkbox"/> Low	<input type="checkbox"/> Average	<input type="checkbox"/> High	<input type="checkbox"/> Very High
How would you describe the availability of parks, gardens, & recreational areas in the Bronx?	<input type="checkbox"/> Very Low	<input type="checkbox"/> Low	<input type="checkbox"/> Average	<input type="checkbox"/> High	<input type="checkbox"/> Very High
How would you describe the availability of healthy food in the Bronx?	<input type="checkbox"/> Very Low	<input type="checkbox"/> Low	<input type="checkbox"/> Average	<input type="checkbox"/> High	<input type="checkbox"/> Very High

9. Pregnant women who smoke are more likely to have low birth weight babies.

- True
- False
- Don't Know

10. Pregnant women who breathe large amounts of car and truck fumes are more likely to have babies who are premature.

- True
- False
- Don't Know

11. Rates of asthma are higher in the Bronx than in any other part of New York City.

- True
- False
- Don't Know

12. Pregnant women exposed to high levels of insecticides are more likely to have miscarriages.

- True
- False
- Don't Know

13. A chemical called BPA, which is found in metal cans and some plastic baby bottles, may cause behavior problems in unborn babies and infants.

- True
- False
- Don't know

**14. Some plastic toys contain chemicals that are toxic to babies.**

- True
- False
- Don't Know

**15. Exposure of a child to lead from paint chips or dust can cause behavior problems.**

- True
- False

**16. What, if anything, should be done in the Bronx to change the environment for pregnant women, babies, and the community?**

**17. How do you learn about environmental issues in the Bronx?**

- newspaper
- television
- radio
- on the web
- Other (please specify)

**18. Did your medical provider (doctor, midwife, nurse, or clinic staff) give you or your partner information on environmental risks during the pregnancy?**

- yes
- no
- not applicable

**19. May we contact you for more information?**

- yes
- no

**20. If you would like to be contacted, please enter your contact information below.**

Name

Phone #

Email Address

# **The Bronx Health Link**

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