

Survey shows young adults ready to change their behavior based on sustainable values

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Young adults from Montreal, Halifax and New York City have very specific ideas about what it takes to build a more sustainable world. And they are willing to make the necessary changes to their lifestyles to make such a world a reality. This is the conclusion drawn from a survey sponsored by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), which surveyed 400 young adults between the ages of 18 and 35.

The survey was part a much larger study of [sustainability](#) undertaken by UNEP, called the Global Survey for Sustainable Lifestyles (GSSL). The GSSL is one of the first in-depth surveys to be carried out worldwide. More than 8,000 [young adults](#) from 20 countries responded to an online [questionnaire](#) available in 10 languages. Questions focused on respondents' concerns and hopes for the future as well as pressing priorities that should be addressed by public officials to advance sustainability.

Four Canadian and American universities collaborated on this international project: Two [Montreal](#) universities (Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) and Concordia University), Dalhousie University in Halifax, and Fordham University in [New York City](#). The survey was led by Solange Tremblay, associate professor of communication and sustainability at UQAM and Professor Guy Lachapelle from Concordia's Department of Political Science.

What emerges from the research is that young adults in the New York City area, Halifax and Montreal share the dream of a better-balanced

way of life, inspired by more just and humane values and distinguished by fulfilling work, family and social lives. For these young people, living responsibly means consumption based on necessity, reducing car usage and adopting public transportation for routine travel. They recognize the need to use less water and less energy. Buying local products, recycling and composting are among the practices they are willing to adopt to improve the environment, emphasizing the importance of reducing waste in every form.

Three cities, three ways of viewing the world

These young adults do not, however, all share the same understanding of what is meant by sustainable development. Those from Montreal, for instance, are the most aware of the environmental, social and economical dimensions of sustainability, likely due to the public awareness campaign that followed the adoption of the law on sustainable development in Québec in 2006.

While the survey found young [respondents](#) in Montreal and Halifax are convinced that the two greatest global challenges today are poverty and environmental degradation, young New Yorkers are four to five times more convinced that the economy is a more pressing issue than the environment. This difference, say the study's authors, may be partially explained by the unprecedented economic crisis which began in the United States in 2008.

Other ways in which young adults clearly differ in their concerns depending on where they live:

- Young Montrealers are concerned with their overall quality of life, including the availability of more affordable organic food, expansion of the bicycle path network, and development of solid

neighbourly relationships.

- In Halifax, respondents want to see substantial investments to improve public transportation in the city and its outlying areas, including by the sea; they are also very critical of the sluggishness of local authorities in developing a network of bicycle paths.
- In the New York City area, young adults clearly identified the lack of decent, affordable housing as a major issue, along with energy consumption, pollution and the difficulty of getting into Manhattan, whether by car, train or bicycle.

Better communication needed

The young adults from all three cities are aware that certain measures require collective action, and a number of them believe measures beyond simple information are needed to encourage different behaviours to respond to global problems such as climate change. While 60 per cent believe they could influence public policy, they say communication is severely lacking. Three respondents out of five acknowledge they know little or nothing about how their communities are managed, an observation shared by young adults from other parts of the world. Ultimately, the study shows that the collective values and distinguishing characteristics of each of the three urban centres, along with those of other regions in the world, offer valuable sources of information for the development of public policy.

More information: The results of the survey on young adults in New York, Montreal, and Halifax can be found on pages 62 to 70 of the publication *Visions for Change: Country Papers* (www.unep.fr/scp/publications/d...s.asp?id=WEB/0166/PA), which lists the results by country. *Visions for Change: Recommendations for*

Effective Policies on Sustainable Lifestyles

([www.unep.fr/scp/publications/d ... s.asp?id=DTI/1321/PA](http://www.unep.fr/scp/publications/d...s.asp?id=DTI/1321/PA))

summarizes the results from all the surveyed countries.

Provided by Concordia University

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