

Many americans ambivalent over laws aimed at healthy living

March 20 2012, By Amanda Gardner, HealthDay Reporter

(HealthDay) -- With a recent flood of new regulations or proposals aimed at governing lifestyle choices such as smoking, eating or cellphone use, is the United States in danger of becoming a "nanny state"?

According to a new [Harris Interactive/HealthDay](#) poll, most Americans remain ambivalent about the issue, agreeing that policies that aim to protect public health and safety are sometimes necessary, but believing as well that adults should take responsibility for their own actions, and consequences for health.

In the [online survey](#) of more than 2,200 U.S. adults conducted in late February, 81 percent of [respondents](#) agreed and 33 percent strongly agreed that laws aimed at protecting public safety -- for example, regulations concerning safe driving or childhood vaccinations -- are important to keeping Americans safe.

More than three-quarters also agreed that such initiatives do actually work.

But on the other hand, almost two-thirds (61 percent) worried that these same laws might be too coercive, impeding individual freedoms.

"The public is somewhat schizophrenic about laws and policies that are intended to improve health and safety and reduce injuries and accidents," said Humphrey Taylor, chairman of The Harris Poll. "Most people favor many regulations that protect them but they worry about

our becoming a 'nanny state.' "

Pollsters quizzed respondents on 14 different policies, laws and programs intended to improve health and safety.

"Most of the 14 policies, programs and regulations in our survey are supported by large majorities of adults, and some of them are strongly supported," Taylor said.

For instance, virtually all (91 percent) supported a ban on [texting](#) while driving, while 74 percent "strongly" supported this initiative.

Other road-safety initiatives that garnered majority support were banning talking on cellphones while driving (70 percent supporting, 43 percent strongly supporting); requiring motorcycle riders to wear helmets (82 percent supporting, 57 percent strongly supporting); requiring cyclists to wear helmets (73 percent supporting, 42 percent strongly supporting); and the mandate to wear seat belts (86 percent in favor, 66 percent strongly in favor).

Respondents also backed up many nutrition-related measures, such as those requiring eating establishments to reveal nutritional information on menus (78 percent supporting, 34 percent strongly supporting); regulations in the offing to reduce the salt content of packaged food (68 percent supporting, 27 percent strongly supporting); and eliminating unhealthy trans fats in restaurants (62 percent in favor, 26 percent strongly in favor).

The regular round of childhood vaccinations (mumps, measles, whooping cough, tuberculosis and polio) also received 86 percent positive votes with 55 percent strongly positive.

A smaller majority (61 percent) also favored giving the controversial

human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine -- which shields against cervical and other cancers -- to children aged 11 and 12, and about one-quarter strongly supported the idea.

Banning smoking in restaurants and public places, a regulation which is gradually gaining ascendancy in different regions of the United States, received 80 percent "pro" votes. Fifty-eight percent strongly supported these types of prohibitions.

Majorities did oppose three policies, however: employers citing obesity as a reason not to hire (76 percent opposed, 43 percent strongly opposed); employers not hiring smokers (65 percent opposed, 34 percent strongly opposed); and the taxing of sugar-sweetened soft drinks (62 percent against, 37 percent strongly against).

And even as they supported many individual initiatives aimed at protecting the public good, 81 percent of respondents agreed that individuals should take responsibility for their own actions and "be free to make their own decisions, even if they suffer as a result."

One expert stressed that a balance must be struck between maintaining both public health and individual freedoms.

"In an interdependent society, there do need to be protocols that protect people from each other and also enable us to protect ourselves," said Philip Howard, chairman of Common Good, a nonprofit organization that champions legal reform.

While most of the regulations mentioned in this survey were supported, Howard, who is also the author of *The Death of Common Sense*, said that there are "a million regulations that Americans would agree are nonsensical."

These might include teachers being required to fill out so many forms that they no longer have time to teach, or extremely complicated reimbursement policies for government-funded insurance.

"Talking on the phone and texting while driving are actively dangerous for other people," he reasoned. "Unvaccinated children dramatically increase the risk of other people getting diseases."

However, regulation can also go too far, Howard noted. "In a crowded society, you want protocols and regulations that protect us from each other and give us information," he said. "What you don't want is micromanagement."

More information: For more on the hazards of distracted driving, head to the [U.S. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#).

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