

# The NATION'S HEALTH

The official newspaper of the American Public Health Association

March 2008

## Adults lacking vaccination awareness

### Health workers urged to tackle low adult immunization rates

**D**ESPITE THE PROVEN effectiveness of vaccines and their potential to save thousands of U.S. lives every year, American adults are receiving immunizations at alarmingly low rates.

According to data released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in January, the U.S. adult population is being vaccinated in disappointingly poor numbers, with some adult immunization rates barely breaking the 2 percent range. The National Foundation for Infectious Diseases held a Washington, D.C., news conference on the issue, releasing its own survey findings that illustrate how a lack of awareness as well as a disturbing sense of apathy are

presenting serious obstacles to heading off preventable disease.

"Routine immunization of children in the United States has saved hundreds of thousands of lives and prevented millions of cases of disease, but vaccines are not just for children," said Anne Schuchat, MD, director of CDC's National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases, in a foundation news release.

"These new data show there are not yet very many adults taking full advantage of the great advancements in prevention that have been made in the past few years."

CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices



Photo by Tim Boyle, courtesy Getty Images

Registered nurse Betty Lewis, left, administers a free influenza shot to Chicago resident Elaine Louie in October 2006.

See **SHOTS**,  
Page 4

## CDC, HRSA targets

### President's 2009 budget plan would set health programs back

**P**UBLIC health would receive a crushing blow

under President Bush's fiscal year 2009 federal budget proposal, which recommends massive cuts to top public health agencies and critical public health programs. In response, advocates are coming together to work with Congress in hopes of reversing what has become a frequent funding trend.

Bush's 2009 proposal, which was released in early February, recommends cutting funding to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention by more than \$412 million — a 7 percent cut below fiscal year 2008 funding and a return to 2003 funding

See **2009 BUDGET**,  
Page 18



Photo by Jewel Samad, courtesy AFP/Getty Images

Students presented 1.5 million green footprints in support of saving the world's climate to UN leaders in Bali in December.

## Children vulnerable to climate effects

### For youth, global climate change is about action, not debate

First in a series of stories on climate change and health in conjunction with APHA's 2008 National Public Health Week observance, which takes place April 7–13 and has a theme of "Climate Change: Our Health in the Balance."

**I**N 2004, a hurricane named Ivan slammed into the small island nation of Grenada in the southeastern Caribbean Sea, leaving devastation and ruin in its wake. For Abe Fergusson, who lives just south of Grenada in Trinidad and Tobago, the hurricane was a defining moment, propelling the now 15-year-old to become one of the many international youth voices of climate change.

Fergusson's aunt lives in Grenada and survived the destruction of Ivan, becoming the subject of an essay he entered into a 2005 global competition looking for young Web site developers. His essay took one of the top prizes and landed Fergusson a spot at a week-long workshop in Jamaica where young people from around the world learned to use the technology of the Internet to educate others.

Fergusson's idea was to create a Web site where young people can talk about their experiences with natural disasters as well as where people could learn how to

better prepare themselves.

Today, Fergusson is a Natural Disaster Youth Summit ambassador and is getting ready for the summit's 2008 international conference in April in Trinidad and Tobago. The summit, which is looking for donors to provide funding, has a theme of "Global Warming and Disaster

See **CLIMATE KIDS**,  
Page 16



Photo by Ahmad Zamroni, courtesy AFP/Getty Images

A girl stands near a damaged peatland in Indonesia in November. Indonesia is the world's third largest greenhouse gas emitter.

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## Youth speaking out on global climate

**CLIMATE KIDS,**  
Continued from Page 1

Reduction.” In a video message to youth attending the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change meeting in Bali in December, Fergusson said: “We know that climate change is happening now, so we are taking action. Most important is our mission to develop a sense of responsibility toward our communities. But we need your help. It’s time for the voices of youth to be heard and supported.” In an interview with *The Nation’s Health*, Fergusson pointed to language in the international Kyoto Protocol that calls on youth to have a voice and place beside adults in the climate change discussion — “we care about the environment, we are the future and we cannot do it alone,” he said.

“Climate change is the hot topic throughout the world as we are all now beginning to see and feel the effects of our lack of caring for the environment: severe cold or hot weather, frequently experiencing earthquakes, hurricanes, flooding, landslides,” he said. “(This) calls on the youth of the world to be mindful that we are the future inheritors of the Earth. Let’s care for it.”

Fortunately, Fergusson is not alone. The movement to address climate change is brimming with young people, many for whom climate change isn’t a debate

at all, but a call to action. For Meredith Epstein, a 21-year-old environmental studies major at St. Mary’s College in Maryland and former president of the campus Student Environmental Action Coalition, addressing climate change is “absolutely vital.” On Jan. 31, Epstein and her fellow student advocates took part in Focus the Nation, a national teach-in day to bring attention to climate change. As part of their activities, about 100 students, staff and faculty — including a participant dressed as a polar bear — took part in the second annual Polar Bear Splash by taking a dip in the nearby 39-degree St. Mary’s River.

“We wanted to make a statement saying that we want our school to become carbon neutral and want others to cut carbon in their lives, and we’re willing to do something really crazy to show our support,” Epstein said.

Just last year, St. Mary’s College students voted to increase student fees to help the university pay for renewable energy credits, making the university “technically 100 percent wind powered,” Epstein said, though more needs to be

done to help the campus truly offset its carbon footprint. Many young advocates see the issue as not purely an environmental one, but one that is integral to their future quality of life, their future jobs, their health and to promoting justice, said Jessy Tolkan, co-director of Energy Action Coalition, a coalition of more than 40 youth organizations across the United States and Canada working for clean energy alternatives. The coalition runs the national Campus

Climate Challenge, which helps students organize and succeed at creating models for cleaner energy on college campuses. So far, the coalition has helped in achieving more than 450 success stories across the

nation at high schools as well as colleges, Tolkan told *The Nation’s Health*, and more than 400 college presidents have signed a commitment to achieve climate neutrality, or in other words, to leave no carbon footprint.

“Students across the country are saying ‘we’re not going to sit and debate whether this is a problem...even if the federal government isn’t going to act, we’re going to,’” she said. “This is the genera-

**“Students across the country are saying ‘we’re not going to sit and debate whether this is a problem...even if the federal government isn’t going to act, we’re going to.’”**

— Jessy Tolkan



Photo by Luis Liwanag, courtesy AFP/Getty Images

Children demonstrate for an environmentally friendly, waste-free Christmas in front of a church in Manila in December.

tion that has the most at stake when it comes to the impact of global warming. This generation never went through the doubts about global warming...we see it as an opportunity as a generation to take proactive steps to what we see as the definitive challenge of our time.”

For example, Tennessee college students in 2006 passed a 12-campus referendum to institute a student “green fee” to help their universities purchase wind energy, Tolkan said, and now a dozen colleges across the state are purchasing as much as 20 percent of their energy from wind power. College students in Kalamazoo, Mich., created a biodiesel lab on campus, collected waste vegetable oil from across the city and retrofitted campus vehicles to run on the fuel created in the lab. In West Virginia, a coalition of college and high school students have banded together on behalf of Marsh Fork Elementary School, joining the many community voices in asking that policy-makers move the school away from a nearby coal processing plant.

Tolkan said she thinks young people face and fight climate change in a fundamentally different way than their older counterparts because many view the issue as intrinsic to their futures. To spread that sense of urgency, coalition organizers and student leaders often talk about the current and future health impacts climate change is having on communities, Tolkan said. Talking about health puts the emphasis on “people’s lives — it’s a human face,” she said.

### Changing climate a danger to kids’ health

Young people aren’t only talking about the relationship of climate change and health — they are also especially vulnerable to the health effects.

According to a 2007 technical report from the American Academy of Pediatrics, “children represent a particularly vulnerable group that is likely to suffer disproportionately from both direct and indirect adverse health effects of climate change.” The report, “Global Climate Change and Children’s Health,” details how children globally are likely to suffer from more severe weather events related to a changing climate, how they will bear a disproportionate burden of the infectious and vector-borne diseases that travel easier in hotter temperatures, and why curbing climate change is a critical part of addressing childhood respiratory illness. Also highlighted is the important role pediatric health care professionals have in supporting environmental sustainability, as “over the last year or two, it’s become increasingly obvious that climate change is the elephant in the room in terms of health threats for children,” said Katherine Shea, MD, lead author of the academy report and an adjunct professor in the School of Public Health at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill.

“We need individual change, professional change, political change — none of them alone will change the trajectory of climate change enough to prevent the catastrophic,” Shea told *The Nation’s*

## Girl Scouts take on climate change challenge

**T**YPICALLY known for their green uniforms and hard-to-resist cookies, Girl Scouts may soon be recognized for their environmental prowess and expertise on climate change.

Girl Scouts from around the nation and world are now applying to be part of the organization’s “Global Climate Change: Take a Stand!” Leadership Institute in August in New York. According to Kate Pickle, Science, Technology, Engineering and Math Project manager for Girl Scouts USA, many girls have expressed an inter-

est in addressing climate change and some troops are already getting their feet wet. For example, she said, a northern New York Girl Scout troop is conducting energy audits at local businesses and talking to state policy-makers about taking action.

“We want to build leaders for tomorrow,” Pickle said. “We want girls to get in there and get their hands dirty.”

The institute is open to girls in grades nine, 10 and 11, and among its goals are to teach girls about the environmental impact of global climate change, help them discover the connec-

tions between a changing climate and how people live, and assist them in creating action plans to take back to their communities. Organizers hope, Pickle said, that the institute will help pilot new activities that can be integrated into the Girl Scouts’ national curriculum. Already, Girl Scouts USA is developing a “Climate Change Action Guide” to help local councils create climate change endeavors that fit their communities.

For more info, visit [www.girlscouts.org](http://www.girlscouts.org). ■  
— Kim Krisberg

*Health.* “Because pediatricians tend to be as a group very forward-thinking and understand prevention...it seemed like a natural constituency to approach.”

Shea said the academy’s message has a two-part goal: to help pediatricians prepare for the guaranteed health consequences of climate change and work with public health officials to anticipate and plan for increased health complications among children. The second part, she said, is to introduce a sense of urgency and help pediatricians make the transition into climate change role models.

Luckily, much of the public health preparedness infrastructure already in place is also perfect for helping communities prepare for and adapt to climate



Photo courtesy St. Mary's College

*Students at St. Mary's College in St. Mary's City, Md., draw attention to global climate change by jumping into a river in January.*

change, Shea noted. However, children’s needs must always be specifically considered when preparedness and adaptation plans are being created and updated — adult-sized plans won’t necessarily translate for kids.

On a global scale, Shea said, achieving better child survival rates and reaching international Millennium Development Goals on health will not be possible without working to curb climate change as well. It is clear that the poorest countries with the least capacity to respond to climate change will suffer the greatest impacts, Shea said. For example, infectious diarrhea is the second-leading cause of death among young children globally, and water-borne gastroenteritis incidence is expected to increase due to climate change.

Already, 1.2 billion people don’t have access to clean water and 2.6 billion don’t have access to proper sanitation, which when overlapped with climate change results in dire predictions, according to Donna Goodman, program advisor for climate change and the environment at

UNICEF. Climate change is expected to make UNICEF’s everyday development work even harder, Goodman said, because existing children’s health problems will be compounded.

“In my opinion, it’s a priority for UNICEF that children’s voices need to be heard and we need to support their local actions,” Goodman told *The Nation’s Health*. “Children and young people are the experts in their local communities and it would be great if we could get their local governments to take them more seriously.”

Children in the developing world will probably experience the health effects of climate change first, but “without a doubt, no child will be able to avoid the longer-term impacts over time and that’s the unfortunate reality,” said Nsedu Obot Witherspoon, MPH, executive director of the Children’s Environmental Health Network and a past chair of APHA’s Environment Section. Witherspoon and her colleagues at the network help train health care providers on environmental health issues and are working to define what the network’s role should be in climate change discussions. Ideally, Witherspoon said, health care providers can become role models and champions for global climate change reduction.

“All we have to do is look at the faces of our children that are born today — those who will really be seeing the impacts of this,” she said. “This isn’t just something that’s written about in obscure journals...this is actually something that we all have an individual responsibility in and it will impact every single one of us.”

Even in the United States, though, some children may feel the impact harder than others, and those children are likely to live in low-income families and minority communities.

Similar to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, in times of extreme weather and disaster, it is often people in low-income communities that aren’t able to pack up and evacuate — they might have nowhere to go or no money to get there, said Nia Robinson, director of the Environmental Justice and Climate Change Initiative, an organization dedicated to creating just climate change policies. The initiative, Robinson said, works hard to ensure that their movement is a diverse one, so that “20 years from now we’re not looking out at a upper middle-class, white room (of environmentalists)...We want to make sure there are people sitting in that room who are the ones disproportionately impacted.”

Robinson said she often uses issues of health and finances to help people feel they have a stake in conversations on climate change. In fact, she said, there are times when she’s talking to audiences and doesn’t even mention traditional environmental images until the end of the discussion. A single



Photo by Gergely Botar, courtesy AFP/Getty Images

*Schoolchildren in Budapest, Hungary, assemble a map of their country outside of the Parliament building in November to protest pollution and climate change. The event was held at a closing rally for a country-wide environmental program.*

mother with three children in Detroit isn’t worried about polar bears and glaciers, Robinson noted, but she may be worried about being uninsured in the summer when she spends too much time in a local emergency room with her asthmatic child. That mother lives in an “absolutely polluted environment and her babies don’t get the opportunity to live full and healthy childhoods because they can’t breathe,” she said.

“We can’t start out by saying ‘I know something

and you need to know it’ or by talking like I know more than you do,” Robinson said. “We have to listen and understand what people’s needs are — that’s how you craft the conversation.”

For more information about climate change and youth, visit [www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org), <http://ndys.earth.jp> or [www.energyaction.net/main](http://www.energyaction.net/main). For more information about this year’s National Public Health Week observance, visit [www.nphw.org](http://www.nphw.org). ■

— Kim Krisberg



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