



NAPOLI SHKOLNIK

**ENVIRONMENTAL  
LAW FORUM**

The 2025 Community  
Environmental Action Survey:

# **AMERICANS' PERCEPTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION**

A study conducted by Napoli Shkolnik for the  
Environmental Law Forum

# A MESSAGE FROM THE NAPOLI SHKOLNIK LEADERSHIP TEAM

Litigation is an essential option when other avenues have been exhausted or proven ineffective. We at Napoli Shkolnik understand that experienced environmental lawyers can help communities navigate legal complexities, turn concerns into enforceable claims, and fight for cleanup, fair compensation, and full transparency.

When a community faces contamination and perceives a lack of adequate government response, taking decisive, informed action is essential. The first steps should include:

- **Document health concerns and environmental observations carefully.** Detailed records of new or worsening health issues, unusual odors, visible pollution, or other environmental changes help identify patterns and establish links to contamination.
- **Request water quality reports and other environmental data from local utilities and regulatory bodies.** These reports illuminate the contaminants present and their concentrations, offering insight into the severity and scope of exposure.
- **Connect with neighbors sharing similar concerns.** Forming a network of residents affected by or worried about contamination strengthens community influence and facilitates information and resource sharing.
- **Research local pollution sources.** Public databases and government resources can reveal the locations of industrial facilities, permitted emissions, and other potential contamination sources, equipping communities with facts to demand accountability and push for investigations.

Over the past two decades, our firm has secured over \$15 billion in settlements for communities affected by PFAS contamination, represented residents in Flint, Michigan, and continues to fight for 9/11 first responders exposed to toxic dust. When the systems meant to protect communities fail them, we step in to ensure that polluters – not taxpayers – bear the cost of cleanup and compensation.

For concerned readers, the path forward starts with awareness. Know what's in your community's air, water, and soil. Connect with your neighbors. Demand regular reporting and independent testing. Use your voice in local government forums. And when necessary, contact us to discuss how legal action can protect your family and community.



**Marie E. Napoli**



**Paul J. Napoli**



**Hunter J. Shkolnik**



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY & KEY INSIGHTS

## 87% OF AMERICANS EXPRESS CONCERN ABOUT POLLUTION.



Widespread concern is driven by personal experience, with 1 in 4 Americans reporting pollution-linked health problems in their families. Parents lead environmental advocacy, with 40% deeply concerned about pollution in their communities.

## ONLY 30% KNOW WHAT PFAS IS DESPITE WIDESPREAD CONTAMINATION.



Critical awareness gaps persist, especially among those most at risk. Women face higher biological risks but have lower awareness of key contaminants like ethylene oxide and PFAS.

## 40% OF MILLENNIALS REPORT NEW POLLUTION-LINKED HEALTH ISSUES.



Environmental threats create fears beyond health, including property value loss and displacement. Despite being the youngest generation, millennials show the highest rates of pollution-related health concerns.

## ONLY 17% FEEL CONFIDENT LOCAL GOVERNMENT PROTECTS THEM.



While concern is high, trust in protection systems is low. Communities want independent testing, transparency, and stronger penalties for polluters.

## ENVIRONMENTAL LITIGATION CREATES LASTING CHANGE THROUGH TRANSPARENCY, PREVENTION, AND REMEDIATION.



When other systems fail, legal action provides communities with tools to force disclosure, deter future harm, and secure cleanup funding.



# THE REALITY OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN: AMERICANS' CONCERN ABOUT POLLUTION IS HIGH

# 80%

of Americans believe their household has been exposed to some form of environmental contaminant, whether in the air they breathe, the water they drink, or the soil in their communities.

What's driving this widespread concern? For many, it's personal. One in four Americans reports that they or a family member developed new health problems in the last three years linked to pollution exposure. These real-world experiences shift the issue from an abstract policy debate to an urgent health matter affecting daily life.

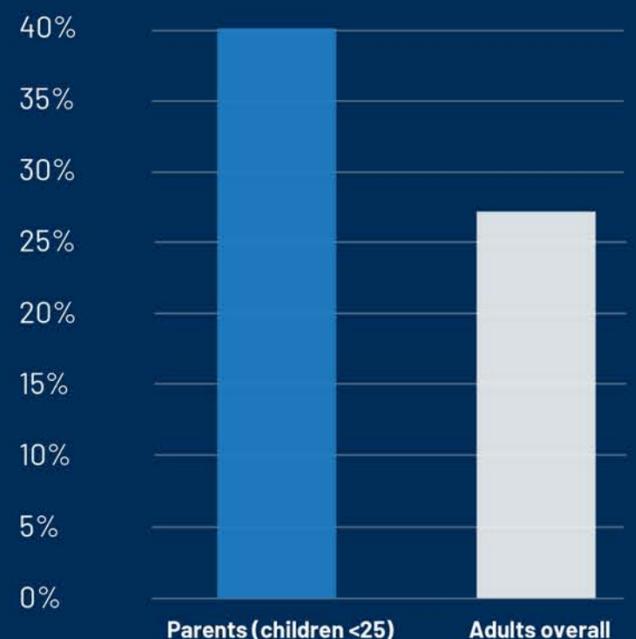


Parents emerge as environmental champions in this study. Forty percent of parents with children under 25 express deep concern about pollution, compared to 27% of adults overall. Parents are also 2.5 times more likely to report pollution-linked illness in their families, underscoring how the stakes are even higher when children's health is on the line.



*“Parents are 2.5 times more likely to report pollution-linked illness in their families.”*

## Parents vs. Adults Overall: Pollution Concerns



# THE KNOWLEDGE GAP CRISIS: AMERICANS' AWARENESS OF MAJOR HAZARDS IS LOW

Many people don't have a clear picture of what's in their air, water, or soil. Our survey reveals large awareness gaps about major contaminants, along with wide differences based on region, income, gender, and generation.

Understanding of specific environmental contaminants varies significantly across the population.

- **Microplastics**, tiny plastic particles from broken-down plastic waste, have become a widely recognized threat. 52% of Americans are aware of them, and 48% believe their households have been exposed. This reflects increasing media attention and scientific studies on microplastics infiltrating food chains and water supplies.
- **Awareness of PFAS**, synthetic chemicals used in non-stick cookware and firefighting foam, is often called a "forever chemical" due to its persistence in the environment and human body, is considerably lower. Only 30% know what PFAS is and its effects, and just 31% believe they have been exposed despite research showing PFAS contamination in 98% of tested U.S. waterways.
- **Ethylene oxide (EtO)**, a gas used to sterilize medical equipment, a highly toxic chemical linked to cancer risk and still in active industrial use, is the least recognized. Merely 21% say they are familiar with EtO, and only 12.3% believe they or their households have been exposed to it.

Many Americans remain unaware of the real threats lurking in their communities, which limits their ability to demand protective measures.



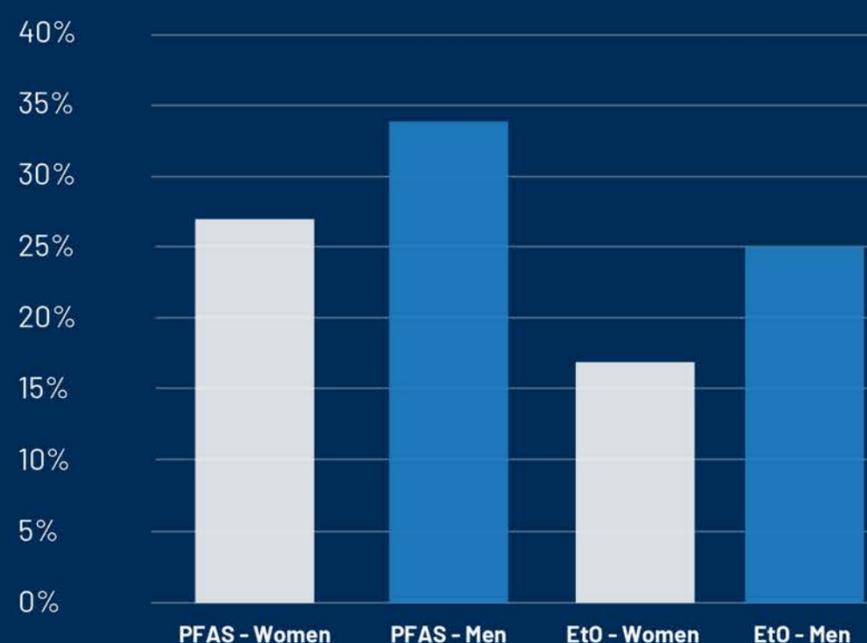
## The Gender Knowledge Gap

Despite higher biological vulnerability, especially during pregnancy and through everyday exposure to consumer products and medical devices, women are less aware than men about certain contaminants.

Just 27% of women say they know about PFAS compared to 34% of men. The disparity is even wider for EtO, where only 17% of women report awareness versus 25% of men. This gap leaves many women without critical information they need to protect themselves and their families.

**Addressing this knowledge imbalance is vital to reducing health risks and empowering women as advocates for safer environments.**

## Awareness of PFAS and EtO by Gender



# REGIONAL PARADOX: HIGHEST RISK, LOWEST CONCERN

The regions with the greatest environmental risks often express the least concern about pollution, creating a paradox with serious implications.

Only 21% of respondents in the southern U.S. know what EtO is and understand its health impacts, despite that region hosting the largest number of ethylene oxide-emitting facilities in the U.S.. In the Midwest, 42% of residents have never heard of EtO.

Regarding pollution concern, roughly 24% of Southerners and 21% of Midwesterners say they are very concerned about their community's environmental quality. These regions face long histories of environmental injustice, chronic underinvestment in infrastructure, and limited access to public testing, all of which contribute to dangerous blind spots in awareness and hinder adequate protection.



## Income and Awareness Disconnect

Environmental knowledge and concern also correlate with income levels in troubling ways. Nearly half (46%) of Americans earning under \$50,000 annually say they do not believe their households have been exposed to any contaminants, despite mounting evidence that low-income communities bear disproportionate environmental burdens.

Information barriers, lack of widespread testing and systemic neglect mean that those at greatest risk are often the least informed, leaving them vulnerable and underserved.



## Generational Knowledge Gap

Only 33% of respondents believe their tap water is completely safe to drink. Even fewer (29%) feel confident their soil and land are free from harmful contaminants. This uncertainty reflects growing doubts fueled by high-profile environmental crises, like the Flint, Michigan water crisis, and emerging scientific findings.

Younger Americans, especially Gen Z (ages 21-28 in this survey), are far more skeptical than older generations. About 26% of Gen Z say their tap water is unsafe, compared to only 6% of baby boomers. This is a reflection of lived experiences and heightened awareness of environmental crises.

Gen Z leads in knowledge about microplastics (68%) and EtO (28%), reflecting younger generations' access to information and concern for emerging issues. However, they know the least about lead contamination, a well-established but ongoing hazard. Millennials (ages 29-44, 40%) are the most likely to report new health issues linked to pollution. This suggests both rising awareness and perhaps rising exposure among this cohort.

**There is a clear need for tailored education efforts that address the strengths and gaps unique to each generation.**



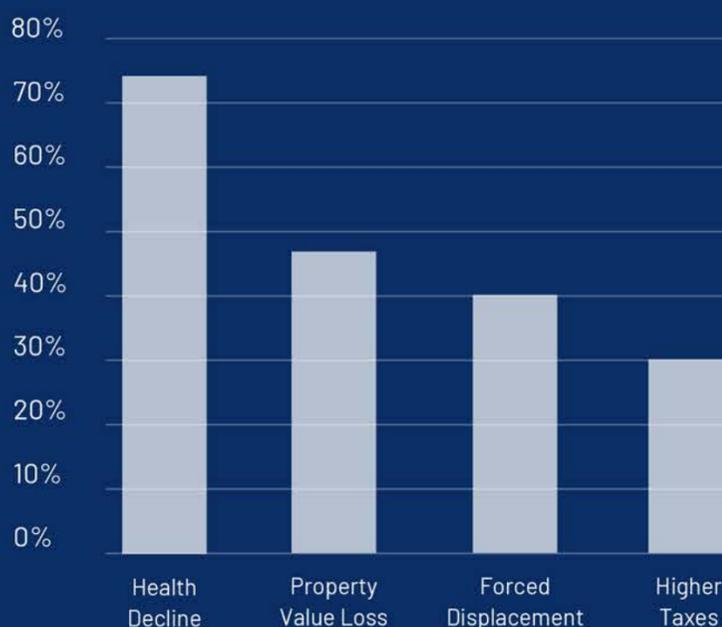
# THE HEALTH IMPACT REALITY

Pollution raises a host of fears beyond personal health. When asked about their greatest concerns related to environmental threats, Americans named:

- **A decline in personal or family health (74%)**
- **Loss of property value (47%)**
- **Forced displacement from contaminated neighborhoods (40%)**
- **Increased taxes to cover cleanup costs (30%)**

These fears reveal pollution’s broad impact, which affects physical well-being, financial security, housing stability and trust in government.

## Perceived Personal Impact of Contamination



### The Millennial Health Alert

Despite being younger than Gen X (ages 45-60) and boomers (ages 61-79), 40% of millennials report that they or a family member has developed new health problems they attribute to pollution exposure. This high rate signals both growing awareness and a concerning rise in environment-linked health issues within this generation.

Millennials are a key demographic shaping environmental discourse and policy, using grassroots campaigns, digital advocacy and coalition-building to amplify environmental priorities. Their growing concern is influencing public opinion and pressuring policymakers to respond.



### The Power Disconnect

A major challenge in addressing environmental health is the disconnect between the most concerned and those with decision-making power. Millennials and Gen Z are increasingly shaping the conversation on environmental health through advocacy, social media and grassroots organizing. Yet, much of the formal decision-making power still rests with older generations, creating a gap between those most concerned and those in positions to enact policy change.



**Baby boomers hold 43% of Congressional seats while representing 19% of the U.S. population. Yet they are the least likely to see contamination as a serious threat: Only 6% believe their tap water is unsafe compared to 26% of Gen Z and 25% of millennials.**

This imbalance means that generations most worried about pollution have the least political influence over environmental policy, creating barriers to meaningful change. Bridging this power gap is critical to protecting current and future generations.

# THE ACTION GAP

While 65% of Americans trust their local government to protect them from environmental harm, far fewer feel truly confident. Only 17% express strong confidence that local authorities are effectively safeguarding their communities. The majority of people want to believe in their institutions but doubt whether current protections are enough.

This confidence varies by generation. Boomers are the most assured, with 23% feeling very confident in local environmental safety. Younger generations are less optimistic (Percentage confident in local safety: GenX - 13%, millennial - 10%, GenZ -10%), reflecting their higher expectations for transparency and accountability.



## Building Community Confidence

Residents need tangible improvements in how environmental information is shared and enforced. Clear, consistent communication and stronger oversight would help communities feel safer and more empowered.

Survey respondents identify several key actions they believe would build greater confidence in local environmental protections:

- **34% want regular, transparent public reporting on pollution, delivered simply and consistently like weather updates.**
- **25% prioritize independent air and water testing by third parties to ensure unbiased, trustworthy results.**
- **20% call for harsher penalties for polluters to hold companies accountable and reduce contamination.**
- **15% support stronger regulations to provide more robust environmental protections.**

Millennials (42%) and Gen Z (43%) in particular place special importance on ongoing education and real-time environmental updates. They believe communities deserve timely, accessible information to guide meaningful action.



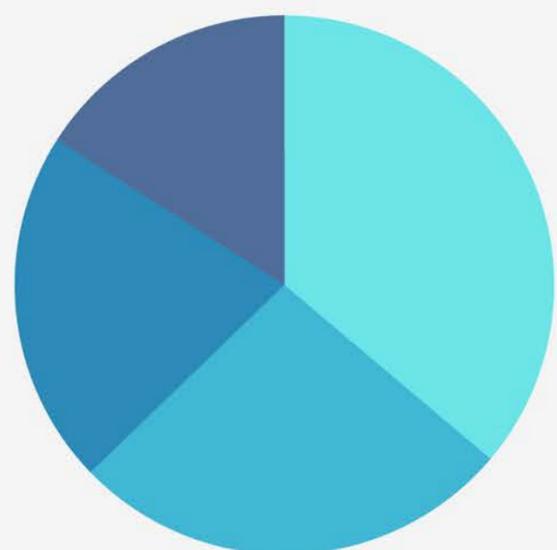
## Raising Community Awareness

Awareness is a powerful driver of change, as informed communities can mobilize and hold decision-makers accountable. Raising visibility about environmental threats helps ensure sustained attention and action. To build awareness, communities should:

- **Actively share information** about local environmental risks through social media platforms, newsletters, local news outlets, and community forums, helping to educate and engage a wider audience.
- **Participate in city council and county meetings** where residents can voice their concerns directly to elected officials and influence local policy and enforcement priorities.
- **Organize neighborhood air and water testing programs** in partnership with universities, environmental nonprofits or accredited independent labs. These efforts gather unbiased data that can confirm community concerns and strengthen demands for cleanup or remediation.
- **Maintain consistent community activism and advocacy efforts** to pressure local governments and industries to increase transparency and implement stronger environmental protections.

## Priorities for Environmental Protection

- Transparent, regular public reporting
- Independent air & water testing
- Harsher penalties for polluters
- Stronger environmental regulations



# EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES AND LEGAL PATHWAYS TO JUSTICE



## Taking Action in Your Community

Across the country, people are recognizing that environmental threats are personal and immediate. Parents lead the charge, younger generations bring new energy and urgency, and growing numbers of residents seek transparency and independent verification of what's in their air and water.

The power of collective action cannot be overstated. When neighbors unite around a shared concern, their voices grow louder and harder to ignore. Community groups organizing around environmental health have influenced local policy, pushed for improved infrastructure, and brought national attention to contamination crises.

One of the most famous examples of community-led environmental action took place in Love Canal, New York. In the late 1970s, resident Lois Gibbs discovered her neighborhood was built on top of a buried toxic waste site. She organized her neighbors into the Love Canal Homeowners Association, led petitions, and staged protests that forced the evacuation of hundreds of families. The movement drew national attention and ultimately led to the creation of the U.S. Superfund program to identify and clean up hazardous waste sites.



## Legal Action as a Community Tool: Transparency, Prevention, and Remediation

Legal support can be a necessary tool in this fight. By working with environmental lawyers, communities gain access to expertise that helps translate concern into results. Environmental litigation creates lasting change through three essential steps:

1. **Transparency first.** Litigation forces disclosure of contamination data and creates public records that improve community access to critical information about environmental threats.
2. **Prevention through deterrence.** Holding polluters financially responsible for cleanup costs and health impacts shifts the burden away from taxpayers while discouraging future misconduct.
3. **Remediation and recovery.** Legal action ensures resources are available to fund cleanup efforts and support complete community recovery from contamination.



## Communities should consider legal action when:

- Contamination affects multiple families.
- Government efforts to protect public health are inadequate or delayed.
- Companies responsible for pollution avoid accountability or fail to remediate.
- Health impacts are documented and linked to contamination.
- Independent testing either reveals hidden risks or is necessary to reveal them.
- Document health concerns and environmental observations carefully. Detailed records of new or worsening health issues, unusual odors, visible pollution, or other environmental changes help identify patterns and establish links to contamination.





# SURVEY METHODOLOGY

Napoli Shkolnik conducted the 2025 Environmental Contaminants Survey in partnership with Dynata, a leading global data and insights platform. The survey was fielded to 1,000 U.S. adults aged 21 and older during July 2025.

## Sample Demographics:

- Nationally representative sample across all 50 states
- Age range: 21-79 years
- Income levels: Under \$25,000 to \$200,000+
- Geographic distribution: Northeast, South, Midwest, and West regions
- Gender split: 49% male, 51% female
- Generation split: Baby Boomers (25%), Gen X (28%), Millennials (32%), Gen Z aged
- 21+ (14%), Born 1945 or earlier (1%)

## Methodology:

- Online survey instrument
- Margin of error: 95% confidence level
- Data collection managed by Dynata's certified research platform

**Survey Topics:** The questionnaire covered environmental awareness, contamination concerns, trust in local government, health impacts, and preferred actions for environmental protection. Questions focused on specific contaminants, including PFAS, ethylene oxide, microplastics, and lead.

All data was weighted to ensure demographic representativeness of the U.S. adult population based on U.S. Census data.

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