

Assessing Demand for a Public Health Department in Lancaster County

Jennifer Meyer, Ph.D.
jennifer.meyer@fandm.edu

Methods

To elicit demand for a public health department, we used a contingent valuation technique. Contingent valuation is a commonly used technique in economic surveys to assess demand for hypothetical goods and services. This technique sets up a hypothetical referendum in which respondents indicate whether they would support a good or service at a given cost level. By assigning the good or service a hypothetical cost, contingent valuation produces more realistic estimates of demand. A number of studies have shown that well-designed contingent valuation experiments produce estimates of demand that are consistent with actual demand for goods and services.

In our survey experiment, respondents were provided with some information about the role of a public health department. Respondents were then asked if they would pay a \$50 annual cost increase to fund a public health department in Lancaster County. Respondents that responded affirmatively were then asked about their willingness to pay a \$100 and then \$250 annual cost. Respondents that indicated that they would not accept a \$50 annual cost were then asked about their willingness to pay a \$25 and then \$5 annual cost.

Importantly, many public health departments are funded without imposing annual costs on citizens. Respondents all received a debriefing in which they were told that there were no immediate plans for tax increases and that many public health departments are funded without tax increases or with very marginal tax increases.

We were also interested in how much demand for a public health department is linked to the current COVID-19 pandemic. We randomized respondents into either a COVID-19 condition or a lead condition. For the COVID-19 condition, respondents received a brief prompt about the severity of COVID-19 in Lancaster County and how a public health department would help to address the problem. Respondents in the lead condition received a similar prompt that detailed the problem of lead poisoning in Lancaster County. If demand for a public health department was driven primarily by COVID-19, we would expect respondents in the COVID-19 condition to express higher demand than those in the lead condition.

Survey Questions

Information about Public Health Department

Respondents were randomized to receive either the Lead Information condition or the COVID-19 Information condition below.

Lead information condition

Lancaster ranks second highest in Pennsylvania for children with high levels of lead in their blood. High lead levels can cause physical and mental health problems, including lower IQs.

Imagine there was a new voter referendum in Lancaster County which proposed to create a Public Health Department to improve community health. For example, the Health Department could give more lead testing and better education about lead. Imagine that having the Health Department would lower the number of children with high lead levels by 25% and promote better public health.

COVID-19 information condition

In August 2020, Lancaster County had over 6,500 confirmed cases of COVID-19. Over 400 people have died due to COVID-19 in Lancaster County. Imagine there was a new voter referendum in Lancaster County which proposed to create a Public Health Department to improve community health. For example, the Health Department could provide better contact tracing, testing and education about preventing COVID-19. Imagine that having the Health Department would lower the cases of COVID-19 by 25% and promote better public health.

Demand questions

1) Imagine that if the referendum to create a Public Health Department passes, you and everyone else in Lancaster County will have to pay \$50 more in taxes every year. Given your current budget, would you vote for or against creating a Public Health Department?

For

Against

Do not know

Refused

Abstain

2) [Ask only if 1 is For]

What if the increase in local taxes each year was \$100, would you vote for or against creating a Public Health Department?

For

Against

Do not know

Refused

Abstain

3) [Ask only if 2 is For]

What if the increase in local taxes each year was \$250, would you vote for or against creating a Public Health Department?

For

Against

Do not know

Refused

Abstain

4) [Ask only if 1 is NOT For]

What if the increase in local taxes each year was \$25, would you vote for or against creating a Public Health Department?

For 1

Against 2

Do not know 8

Refused 9

Abstain 3

5) [Ask only if 1 is NOT For]

What if the increase in local taxes each year was \$5, would you vote for or against creating a Public Health Department?

For 1

Against 2

Do not know 8

Refused 9

Abstain 3

Debriefing

We would like to remind you that this proposed level of tax increase is purely hypothetical. Many counties create public health departments without significant tax increases. Your responses will allow us to assess the demand for these services in Lancaster.