



## ISSUE BRIEF

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# Trauma and trust: How familiarity with government harm and identification with harmed groups shapes government suspicion in Michigan

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## Overview

This report draws on data collected by the [Michigan Metro Area Communities Study](#) (MIMACS) to examine the prevalence of government suspicion - a belief system commonly associated with conspiratorial thinking - in three Michigan municipalities. By analyzing these attitudes, we offer new insights into their causes and consequences. The survey was fielded between January 15, 2024, and March 18, 2024, and captures the views of representative samples of 704 Flint residents, 1,379 Grand Rapids residents, and 673 Ypsilanti (City and Township) residents. The analysis was supported by the [Center for Racial Justice](#). Results have been weighted to reflect the population of the survey areas. See full results from [MIMACS surveys here](#).

## Introduction

Conspiratorial thinking— or attempts to attribute significant social and political events to secret plots by powerful actors<sup>2</sup>—has been a recurring feature of social history. From doubts about the moon landing to beliefs that 9/11 was an inside job, many conspiracy theories persist despite robust scientific evidence debunking them. The dissemination of these ideas fuels misinformation and deepens social distrust. Of course, conspiratorial thinking is not always harmful. Some claims that were once framed as conspiracy theories have proven true and entered the historical record, such as the Watergate scandal. In such instances, these ideas, and the questioning that emerged from them, served as an important mechanism of political accountability.

However, the way these theories are spread and legitimized has changed in recent years. Whereas in the past, conspiracy theories were largely confined to fringe communities in online chat rooms or on public-access television, today they are broadcast on mainstream radio and TV programs and endorsed by influential political figures.<sup>3</sup> As political theorist Hannah Arendt warned, this shift has led to a society where people “believe everything and nothing,”<sup>4</sup> making it increasingly difficult for citizens to make informed choices and for democracy to function effectively.

The enduring appeal of conspiracy theories and their growing prominence in mainstream media raises critical questions about their origins, the individual needs they may be fulfilling, and their societal impacts. While existing research often links conspiratorial thinking to a lack of formal education,<sup>5</sup> we consider another alternative: whether this type of thinking is associated with greater levels of specific types of knowledge. In particular, we examine the relationship between conspiratorial thinking and 1) familiarity with past harms committed by government actors and 2) identification with groups that government actions have harmed.

For many communities, a propensity toward conspiratorial thinking may not reflect an irrational paranoia but rational cynicism<sup>6</sup> or suspicion grounded in lived experiences of systemic injustice and government-inflicted harm. To capture levels of conspiratorial thinking, we rely on a measure that assesses a key component of conspiratorial thinking – government suspicion. Specifically, this measure assesses respondents’ level of agreement with the statement that “many very important things happen in the world that the public is never informed about.”<sup>7</sup> Agreement with this statement is intentionally not tied to awareness of any single conspiracy theory, and instead, it captures a broader sense of suspicion toward government and authority.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, it has also been shown to be a strong predictor of support for a wide range of conspiracy theories in a variety of communities.<sup>9</sup> By examining patterns of government suspicion in three Michigan communities –Grand Rapids, Ypsilanti, and Flint– we aim to provide insights into the drivers of conspiratorial thinking and inform efforts to fortify American democracy.

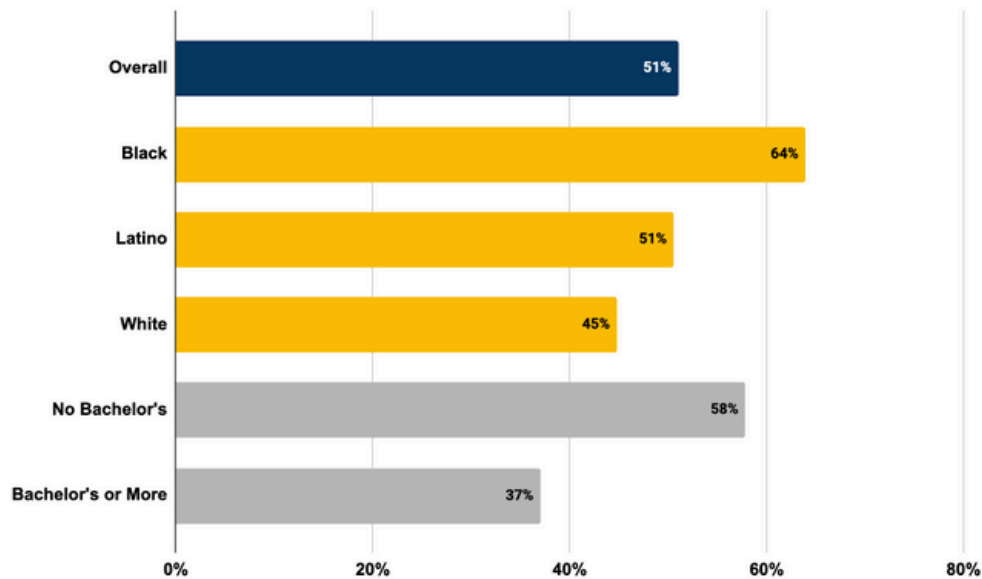


Michigan State Capitol

# Government suspicion is widespread. Over half of the residents living in the three Michigan communities surveyed believe that many very important things happen in the world that the public is never informed about.

- Over half (51%) of households in the three Michigan communities surveyed somewhat or strongly believe that many important things happen in the world that the public is never informed about (see Figure 1).
- Ethnoracial identity played a significant role in levels of government suspicion. Black (64%) residents were more likely than Latino (51%) and White residents (45%) to believe that many important things happen in the world that the public is never informed about.
- Higher levels of formal education were associated with lower levels of government suspicion. About 58% of residents with less than a bachelor's degree in the three Michigan communities surveyed believed that many important things happen in the world that the public is never informed about, compared to 37% of those with a bachelor's degree or more.

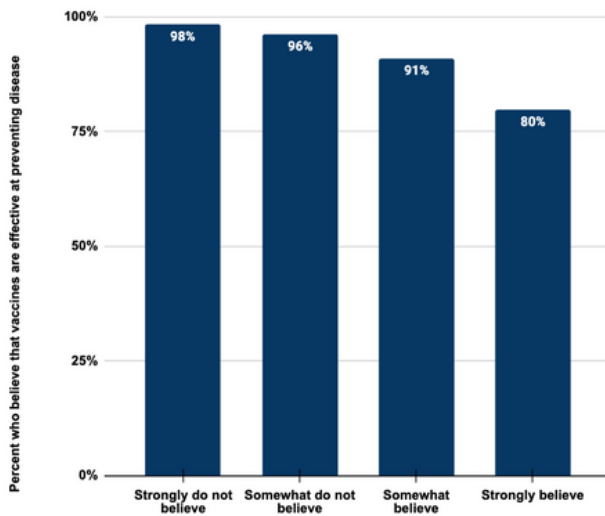
**Figure 1. Percent of Residents Who Believe that Many Very Important Things Happen in the World that the Public is Never Informed About.**



# Those who are less suspicious of their government are more likely to engage in activities that are traditionally encouraged by governing authorities, like voting and getting vaccinated.

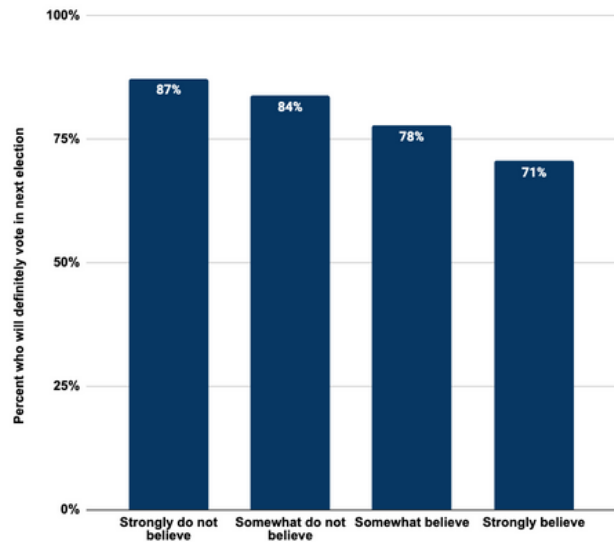
- Nearly all residents of the three Michigan communities surveyed with low levels of government suspicion (e.g., who strongly **do not** believe that many very important things happen in the world that the public is never informed about) supported vaccines (98%) and indicated agreement with the statement, "Vaccines are effective at preventing disease, and they reduce health costs by preventing many other expensive treatments." Agreement with this statement about vaccines was much lower among residents with high levels of government suspicion.<sup>10</sup> Just 80% of households in the three Michigan communities surveyed who strongly believe that many very important things happen in the world that the public is never informed about also believe that vaccines are effective at preventing disease and reducing health costs by preventing many other expensive treatments (see Figure 2).
- Residents of Flint, Grand Rapids, and Ypsilanti with low levels of government suspicion (e.g., who strongly **do not** believe that many very important things happen in the world that the public is never informed about) were more likely to say they would vote in the November 2024 election (87%) than those with high levels of government suspicion (71%) (see Figure 3).

**Figure 2. Vaccine Support, by Level of Government Suspicion**



Level of belief that many very important things happen in the world that the public is never informed about

**Figure 3. Likelihood of Voting, by Level of Government Suspicion**

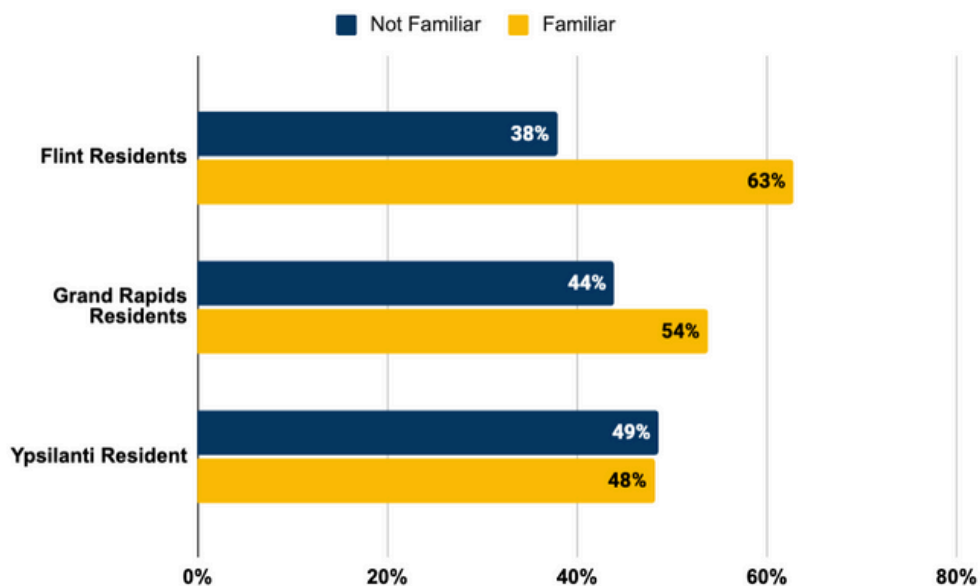


Level of belief that many very important things happen in the world that the public is never informed about

## Individuals who are familiar with government-inflicted harm and identify with the groups harmed had among the highest levels of government suspicion, as shown by the high levels of government suspicion among those both familiar with the Flint Water Crisis and who identify as Flint residents.

- Identification with the group harmed by the Flint Water Crisis<sup>11</sup> was associated with higher levels of government suspicion. Those who resided in Flint (60%) - the community harmed by the 2014 public water crisis - were more likely to hold high levels of government suspicion, than those who lived in Grand Rapids (48%) and Ypsilanti (48%), which were not directly impacted by this crisis (see **Figure 4**).
- Familiarity with the 2014 Flint Water Crisis also contributed to higher levels of government suspicion, among Flint residents.
  - Sixty-three percent of Flint residents who were very familiar with the 2014 water crisis in Flint reported high levels of government suspicion. A much smaller share of Flint residents (37%) who were only somewhat familiar or who were unfamiliar with the 2014 Flint Water Crisis reported high levels of government suspicion.
- Outside of Flint, familiarity with the 2014 Flint water crisis had a weaker effect, if any, on levels of government suspicion, pointing to the importance of both familiarity with the harm and identification with the group harmed.
- Over half (54%) of residents of Grand Rapids who were familiar with the 2014 Flint Water Crisis held high levels of government suspicion, compared to 44% of residents of Grand Rapids who were not familiar with the Flint Water crisis.
- Familiarity with the Flint Water Crisis had no effect on levels of government suspicion among residents in Ypsilanti. Just under half of Ypsilanti residents held high levels of government suspicion, regardless of whether they were (48%) or were not (49%) familiar with the 2014 Flint Water Crisis.

**Figure 4. Level of Government Suspicion, by Familiarity with Flint Water Crisis and Identification with Harmed Group**

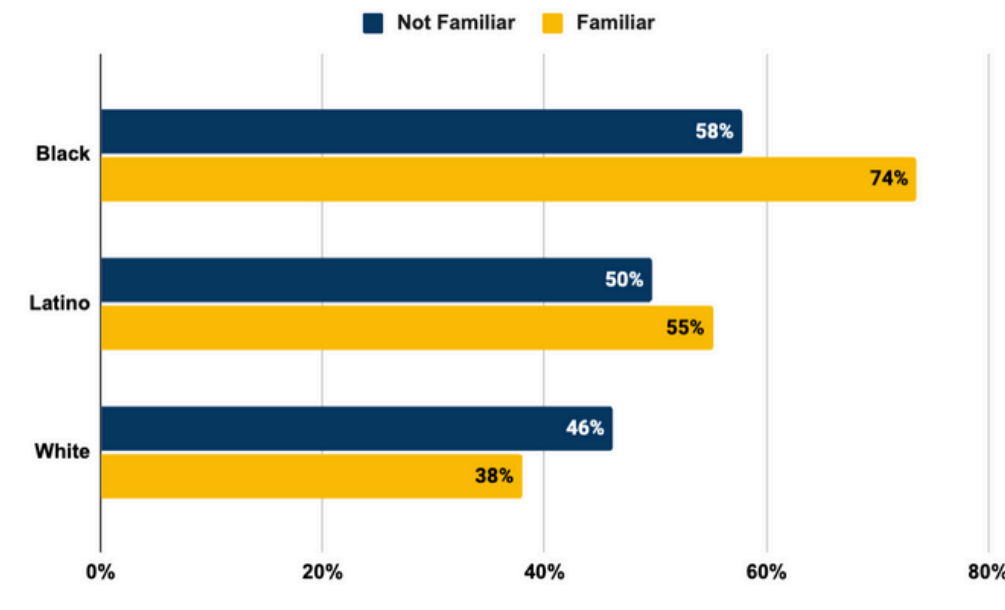


Percent who believe that many very important things happen in the world that the public is never informed about

# The importance of familiarity with a government-inflicted harm, and connection to the harmed group, also affected levels of government suspicion in the case of the U.S. Public Health Service Untreated Syphilis Study that was conducted at Tuskegee.

- Those who shared an ethnoracial identity with the racial groups harmed in the U.S. Public Health Service Untreated Syphilis Study<sup>12</sup> were more likely to hold high levels of government suspicion than those who identified with racial groups not harmed in this study (see Figure 5). Specifically, Black residents (64%) of the three Michigan communities surveyed held higher levels of government suspicion than Latino (51%) or White (45%) residents of these cities.
- Familiarity with the U.S. Public Health Service Untreated Syphilis Study also contributed to higher levels of government suspicion among Black respondents.
  - Nearly three out of every four (74%) Black residents of the three Michigan communities surveyed who reported being somewhat or very familiar with the U.S. Public Health Service Untreated Syphilis Study reported high levels of government suspicion. Only 58% of Black residents of these cities who were unfamiliar with the U.S. Public Health Service Untreated Syphilis Study also reported high levels of government suspicion.
- Familiarity with the U.S. Public Health Service Untreated Syphilis Study had little effect, if any, on levels of government suspicion among individuals who do not identify with the racial group directly harmed in the Study
  - Just over half (55%) of Latino residents who were familiar with the U.S. Public Health Service Untreated Syphilis Study held high levels of government suspicion, compared to 50% of Latino residents who were not familiar with the U.S. Public Health Service Untreated Syphilis Study.
  - Thirty-eight percent of White residents who were familiar with the U.S. Public Health Service Untreated Syphilis Study held high levels of government suspicion. White residents who were unfamiliar with the U.S. Public Health Service Untreated Syphilis Study were more likely to hold high levels of government suspicion.

**Figure 5. Level of Government Suspicion, by Familiarity with Tuskegee Syphilis Study and Connection to Harmed Group**



Percent who believe that many very important things happen in the world that the public is never informed about

## Discussion

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The findings reported in this brief highlight the complex interplay between historical harms, group identity, and government suspicion. By examining the perspectives of residents across Flint, Grand Rapids, and Ypsilanti, we demonstrate that familiarity with systemic, government-led injustices, such as the Flint Water Crisis and the U.S. Public Health Service Untreated Syphilis Study in Tuskegee, heightens government suspicion, particularly among those who identify with the harmed communities. These insights call for a more nuanced understanding of what is often dismissed as conspiratorial thinking. Moreover, they underscore the urgent need to acknowledge historical injustices and rebuild trust in affected communities. Addressing these harms is not only critical to reducing government suspicion but also to fostering democratic engagement and restoring public confidence in governmental institutions.

## About the Authors

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**Franshelly Martinez Ortiz** is a fellow at the U-M Center for Racial Justice and a doctoral candidate in the University of Michigan political science department. Her research focuses on understanding how the legacy of racially targeted institutional violence shapes political attitudes—particularly governmental distrust and cynicism—in racialized communities in the U.S.

**Mara Cecilia Ostfeld** is a faculty lead of the Detroit Metro Area Communities Study, the research director of the Center for Racial Justice, and an associate research professor at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy at U-M.

## Acknowledgement

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# Endnotes

- 1 These cities were selected as part of the National Institute of Health's [Community Engagement Alliance \(CEAL\) Against COVID-19](#). The Michigan CEAL site, [Michigan Communities Conquering COVID-19](#), engages in community-based participatory research (CBPR) to study the community-level awareness and understanding of the multi-level factors (e.g., individual, social determinants) associated with access and uptake of the COVID-19 vaccines and learn how to effectively utilize trusted community-based sites for vaccine delivery as a method to increase uptake of COVID-19 vaccines.
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- 4 Arendt, H. (1973). *The origins of totalitarianism*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. (Original work published 1951)
- 5 Van Prooijen, J. (2017). Why education predicts decreased belief in conspiracy theories. *Applied cognitive psychology*, 31(1), 50-58.
- 6 Gamble, K., Woodbury, T., & Nedungadi, R. (2024). Black Values Survey 2024. Sojourn Strategies and HIT Strategies. [https://cdn.prod.websitefiles.com/64f792f5c75211da2323184e/66d9ff4a9adb021e294754cc\\_Black%20Values%20Clusters%20Research%20.pdf](https://cdn.prod.websitefiles.com/64f792f5c75211da2323184e/66d9ff4a9adb021e294754cc_Black%20Values%20Clusters%20Research%20.pdf)
- 7 Bruder, M., Haffke, P., Neave, N., Nouripanah, N., & Imhoff, R. (2013). Measuring individual differences in generic beliefs in conspiracy theories across cultures: Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire. *Frontiers in psychology*, 4, 225.
- 8 For this brief, we will only focus on government suspicion rather than suspicion of other forms of authority and political institutions.
- 9 Our measures draw from the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale (GCBS) or the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (CMQ) to effectively capture generalized beliefs in conspiracies without referencing specific theories.
- 10 This is consistent with past work demonstrating a robust relationship between vaccine uptake and institutional (dis)trust. For further discussion of this relationship, see: Casselman-Hontalas, A., Adams-Santos, D., & Watkins-Hayes, C. (2024). Discourses of distrust: How lack of trust in the U.S. health-care system shaped COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy. *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, 10(4), 154-172.
- 11 In 2014, the drinking water in Flint, Michigan was contaminated with lead and possibly other harmful bacteria, causing a major public health crisis.
- 12 Between 1932 to 1972, there was an unethical and deeply harmful medical study conducted by the U.S. Public Health Service, in which 400 Black men were intentionally not treated for syphilis to observe the progression of the disease.



## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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