

## **Undergraduate Student Assessment: Identifying the Current and Relative State of Knowledge of and Interest in the Risks of Nuclear Weapons**

University students today: are they knowledgeable about nuclear weapons and threat? Are they even concerned? This is what our study at the University of Toronto Scarborough (UTSC) sought to determine. Despite the importance of youth education on this topic, there has remained a lack of research identifying the current state of knowledge and interest. In fact, the most “recent” studies examining this were completed approximately two decades ago!

Approximately 400 students at UTSC were surveyed in March and April, 2016. Key findings included that compared to 38% of Canadian high school students in 1988 that listed nuclear war as a 1st, 2nd or 3rd concern when asked by Stewart (1988) “What are the three things that worry you most about the future”, only 0.25% of undergraduates listed this today. Additionally, relative to other local and global issues (e.g. medical diseases, climate change, gang/gun violence, Indigenous rights, terrorism, unemployment rates, etc.), the topic of nuclear weapons/war was one that students claimed to not think about at all, nor feel anxious/fearful about, falling close to last in in concern.

Knowledge questions were also asked. While 82-93% of students were able to correctly select the correct multiple choice option to easier questions (i.e. what country has dropped nuclear weapons on another in an act of war; what cities had weapons dropped on them) only 42% of students were able to correctly identify the approximate number of weapons existing worldwide, and only 58% knew the countries making up the “Big Five”.

These findings are alarming. Most undergraduates today place little to no thought or concern on nuclear weapons. Even at the start and end of a university degree, they lack knowledge on basic facts on nuclear weapons and war. In fact, almost 40% of students admitted that they had never learned about nuclear weapons or nuclear war, and the majority of those that did learned only through the brief coverage by the Grade 10 History curriculum.

However, one key finding does show a potential bright future. While the issue may not be on their minds as often as hoped, the most frequently selected of nuclear war threat orientations (as used by Hamilton, Knox, Keilin, and Chavez, 1987) was Disarmist: “Nuclear war can be prevented through active, vocal effort on the part of concerned citizens to convince world powers to disarm. There will be no nuclear war if there are no nuclear weapons.” Thus this younger generation does value global disarmament, it is now just a matter of getting them to think more frequently about this issue. Based on our final category of questions that examined what students feel makes a strong advocacy campaign, and what is the best way to reach students, those interested in involving students should incorporate social media, namely Facebook, and should develop campaigns are fact-based and/or include the personal/student impact of the issue (as opposed to fear or humour campaigns or celebrity endorsement).

### References:

- Hamilton, S., Knox, T. A., Keilin, W. G., & Chavez, E. L. (1987). In the eye of the beholder: accounting for variability in the attitudes and cognitive/affective reactions toward the threat of nuclear war. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 17*(11), 927-952.
- Stewart, G. A. (1988). The relationship between adolescents’ concern over the threat of nuclear war and several personality dimensions. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science, 20*(4), 452-460.