

COVID-19 Vaccine Confidence and Uptake Survey Results from Individuals Currently Incarcerated in Minnesota Prisons

Our approach: In November 2021, UMN’s project team reached out to leadership at three prisons in Minnesota (St. Cloud, Shakopee, and Rush City), asking them to distribute an optional, paper-based survey about COVID-19 vaccine confidence and uptake among their currently incarcerated population. Surveys were administered in each of the three facilities between November 23rd and December 2nd, 2021. Participants had the option to receive a \$5 account credit for participating in this survey. Surveys were collected and returned to the UMN for processing and analysis.

Survey: This survey posed multiple questions to assess individuals’ vaccine confidence and uptake. The questions included short answer opportunities to gather detailed information about individuals’ willingness to receive the COVID-19 vaccination and questions and concerns they had regarding the COVID-19 vaccine.

Participant demographics: 1,392 individuals participated in this survey. The majority identified as men (73%) and the average age of participants was 37 years. 41% of participants identified as non-Hispanic white, 19% identified as non-Hispanic Black, 15% identified as multiracial, 10% identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, and the remainder of participants identified as Hispanic (6%), another race/ethnicity (5%), Asian or Asian American (3%), Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander (<1%), or Middle Eastern or North African (<1%). Of the three prisons that participated, St. Cloud had the highest response rate (42%).

Survey findings:

1. Vaccine uptake: 85% of participants reported having received one or more doses of the COVID-19 vaccine, while 13% had not. 79% of respondents reported receiving doses of the vaccine while in prison or jail.
2. Reasons for getting or planning to get the COVID-19 vaccine: Of those who got or planned to get the vaccine, the most cited reasons were to get back to normal activities in prison (61%) and to protect their own health (54%). Many also wanted to protect their family and friends (47%), help end the COVID-19 pandemic (46%), and protect their community (39%).
3. Reasons for not getting or hesitating to get the COVID-19 vaccine: Of those who had not gotten or were unsure about getting the vaccine, the most (41%) cited reason was “Other,” where participants could write in additional responses. “Other” themes that participants wrote-in included concerns about breakthrough cases, distrust in government, emphasizing one’s own personal choice about vaccination, and sharing concerns about vaccine development.

Additional reasons for not getting or being hesitant about getting the COVID-19 vaccine included concerns over vaccine side effects (37%), distrust of the healthcare and public health systems that recommend the vaccines (23%), concerns that the vaccines do not work (21%), and concerns about the vaccine’s ingredients (20%).

4. Incentives to motivate COVID-19 vaccination: When asked what specific incentives would motivate them to get vaccinated, the most common responses were money (53%), being able to

participate in prison programming (52%), and commissary credit or credits for phone calls and emails (36%). Many also reported that being able to choose which kind of vaccine they get (28%), talking with friends and family about it (27%), and reading educational materials about the COVID-19 vaccine (20%) would help motivate them to get the COVID-19 vaccine.

5. Trusted sources of information about the COVID-19 vaccine: When asked who they would trust as a source of information about the COVID-19 vaccination, most cited healthcare professionals outside of prisons and jails (54%) and friends and family (50%). Others included national health organizations (40%), local and/or state health departments (35%), and healthcare professionals within prisons and jails (30%).

Common questions about the COVID-19 vaccine:

1. Side effects and long term effects of COVID-19 vaccines: Many respondents had questions about the overall side effects of the COVID-19 vaccine and possible long-term effects from vaccination. Some mentioned specific rumored side effects (like fertility issues) and potential long term effects (like organ damage) and some asked how long the side effects last.
2. Vaccine effectiveness and effectiveness against variants: Many respondents had questions about how long the COVID-19 vaccine's protection lasts, if the COVID-19 vaccines work at all, and whether vaccination is necessary. There were also specific questions about whether the COVID-19 vaccines are effective against the Omicron variant and against future variants. Many also had questions about breakthrough cases, the chances of getting COVID-19 after being fully vaccinated, and why they should get the vaccine if they can still contract COVID-19.
3. How the vaccine works and how it was developed: Many respondents had questions about the ingredients of the vaccine and how the vaccines were made so quickly. A few asked why the vaccines were administered if the vaccines were not effective in preventing COVID-19. Questions about the safety of the vaccine and the fast pace at which it was approved by the FDA were also raised.
4. Boosters and frequency of booster doses: Many respondents had questions about how often they will need booster shots, why they need booster shots, when they can receive them, and how effective they are.
5. COVID-19 vaccination in prisons: Some respondents asked why the prisons told them to get the vaccine that would allow them privileges yet still instituted lockdowns. A few asked why the prison system gave them the Johnson & Johnson vaccines, given their limited efficacy.

Common ideas to increase COVID-19 vaccine confidence:

1. More information: Many respondents shared that they would like more information on the COVID-19 vaccines before making a decision. People expressed wanting more information about vaccine efficacy, study results, statistics about COVID-19 and vaccination, vaccine ingredients, and the development of the COVID-19 vaccines.

Many people shared that they would like to see more information about short-term and long-term effects of the COVID-19 vaccines. Individuals also shared how they want access to outside information and want information from doctors and other professionals outside of the prison facilities. A few shared that they would like to hear stories and experiences from those who received COVID-19 vaccines.

2. **Incentives:** Many respondents stated that receiving monetary incentives would help increase their confidence in the COVID-19 vaccine. Many also shared that opening up programming and visitation for those who were vaccinated would help increase confidence.
3. **More time:** Many respondents shared that they need more time to see the effectiveness of the COVID-19 vaccines before deciding whether or not to get vaccinated. Participants also wanted time to observe any short- and long-term effects of vaccination.

Recommendations

1. Extend and expand monetary and programmatic incentives for vaccination.
2. Tailor educational materials to the prison population, recognizing the unique challenges they experience while incarcerated.
3. Increase access to evidence-based information and disseminate in multiple modes (e.g., print, audio, video).
4. Identify trusted messengers outside of the Department of Corrections to provide evidence-based information about vaccines and answer residents' questions.
5. Increase efforts to provide primary vaccine series and boosters, following more intentional education and information sharing. Whenever possible, allow individuals to choose which kind of vaccine they receive.

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