



## Vaccine Attitudes Focus Groups: Young Adults

*published August 9, 2021*

The [Utah Health and Economic Recovery Outreach \(HERO\) Project](#) began in May 2020 as a collaborative statewide testing and analysis project to understand the community-based spread of Covid-19. The goal of the HERO Project is to collect and utilize high-quality local data to help inform decision-makers seeking to guide Utah's citizens and economy through a safe return to normalcy. One year later, the project team is wrapping up its reporting on community testing, impacts of Covid-19 on Utah businesses and consumers, school testing, and vaccine uptake, impact, and implications. This report summarizes and synthesizes focus groups related to vaccines. More information on the HERO Project's past and current work can be found in the project's [previous reporting](#).

Eighteen young adults participated in two focus groups: one with 10 and one with eight participants, each approximately an hour long. The focus groups took place in the late spring and early summer of 2021. Researchers from the University of Utah Department of Internal Medicine's Qualitative Research Core worked on behalf of the HERO Project team to identify key themes from the focus group discussions, which formed the foundation for this report.

### Key Takeaways

Young adults had a variety of experiences during the pandemic and equally broad thoughts on the Covid-19 vaccine.

#### Young Adult Experience

- During the pandemic, some participants felt affected by canceled events and social gatherings placed on hold, while others felt impacted by job losses and changes to their work and home life.
- Employment requirements, others not adhering to pandemic health and safety guidelines, rescinded mandates, and an increase in carelessness due to vaccines all affected young adults' perceptions of their likelihood of exposure to the virus.

#### Vaccine Attitudes

- Risks of the COVID-19 vaccine include unwanted flu-like symptoms, infertility, pregnancy problems, and blood clots. Benefits of the vaccine include feeling relieved and safe, protecting others, and economic stability.
- Some participants were hesitant to be vaccinated when it first became available but became less hesitant after researching the vaccine and talking with people from the medical field. Others were initially excited but became more hesitant over time.
- Young adults turned to peer-reviewed academic journals, the CDC, doctors, experiences of others, and data and statistics to learn about the vaccine.
- Participants faced competition for vaccine appointments in early spring, and thought the system was difficult for some to use and unfair to those without reliable internet access.

## Young Adults Experiences and Perceptions of the Vaccine

Young adults were asked questions regarding their experiences during the pandemic, as well as their perceptions of the benefits of risks of the vaccine, their sources of vaccine information, and the logistics of receiving the vaccine. Fifteen participants had been fully vaccinated, while three had not received any.

### Young Adult Experience During the Pandemic

Everyone had unique experiences but some individuals experienced relatively minor life changes (e.g., canceled pandemic plans, challenges maintaining social lives). Overall, lives remained largely the same. Several participants were students at the start of the pandemic and were required to continue their education remotely from Utah or another state. Participants expressed difficulty switching to online classes and experienced challenges maintaining student jobs (e.g., research assistantship, resident assistantship). Outside of schooling, some had trouble working from home, experienced a change in work duties, or lost their jobs.

*"I worked in senior living at the beginning of the pandemic, and so it was a pretty dramatic shift for me from normalcy into absolute chaos between literally not being willing to see anyone masking up in my house because I had roommates. And I was getting tested often. We had outbreaks, and people were dying, and so it really, really intensely affected my day-to-day life. I was scared to go to the grocery store. I was scared to do anything because I didn't want to get my residents sick. I was just terrified."*

Some young adults felt their chances of coming into contact with the virus were initially high because of their jobs or from coming into contact with individuals who did not follow pandemic guidelines, but felt their exposure risk has lowered due to the vaccine. Others felt the opposite and continue to consider their chances of being exposed to Covid-19 as higher now than they were initially. Many people attributed this feeling of increased risk to lifted mandates and increased carelessness. Others feel they were never at a high risk of exposure because they rarely went out into public, regularly wore masks, and maintained social distancing.

*"I guess with it being summertime, the activities that I do, kind of my social life has stayed about the same. I have a pretty small group of people that I see regularly outside of work. And I do spend most of my time at work, and my work is very strict about the mask usage."*

### Attitudes on the Benefits and Risks of Getting the Vaccine

When asked about the benefits of the vaccine, some participants felt less anxious and more at ease without the worry of spreading the virus to those at greater risk. Others felt that vaccination helped those with "invisible disabilities," such as autoimmune diseases that prevent individuals from receiving the vaccine. Other benefits mentioned included not having to wear masks, being able to resume activities and events, and greater economic security, particularly for small businesses. While participants did not believe the vaccine would completely prevent Covid-19, they did think it would significantly reduce their chances of contracting the virus and that it would lessen symptoms.

*"I think, for me, I personally--some of the benefits of the COVID vaccine is, I feel more at ease going home. I live in Salt Lake, and I do interact with a lot more people than 30, which is my hometown. And in my house, we take care of my grandma, who's like 98 years old, so she's really high-risk. And then my other grandma also lives in the same place, and there's a lot of people who are just older who have weakened immune systems. And so, for me, I feel more comfortable going home because I know I've taken appropriate measures to keep them as safe as possible."*

When asked about the risks of receiving the vaccine, participants mentioned unwanted flu-like symptoms (e.g. joint pain, drowsiness, and feeling sick), infertility, pregnancy problems, and blood clots. Of three unvaccinated individuals, two were not planning to get vaccinated because they are planning to have children in the next few years and did not want side effects of the vaccine to lead to infertility or pregnancy issues. For those who have been vaccinated, a few expressed their preference for the Johnson & Johnson vaccine because it requires one injection, while others did not want the Johnson & Johnson vaccine because of the potential for blood clots.

*"In the beginning, I was hesitant because I'm like, "Oh shoot, that was quick." But I have a girlfriend. She's pre-med. Anyways, I learned that the COVID vaccine, the timeline for it was longer than most seasonal flu vaccine timelines. And that kind of assured me a bit that we have done this before, and we have done it this quick before. It's just been a while. So after I kind of learned that fact, all of my fears subsided. And then after I got Johnson & Johnson, it was like a week before the US put a hold on it, and I was pretty scared. And then I did more stats, more of--maybe I was biased, but more of my research, and I felt more comfortable with my risk. So I was scared, and then I was fine, then I was scared, and now I'm fine again."*

*"I feel like, to be responsible, I need to not get the vaccine because we currently don't know what impact the vaccine has on pregnancies or on childbirth, and in the case that I became pregnant unexpectedly around the time that I get the vaccine, I wouldn't feel okay about that. Everyone who I love, everyone who I know, including those I don't love around me, who would have any negative or at-risk factors with COVID-19 are vaccinated, so I don't feel that it's being socially irresponsible of me not to, in my social circles."*

## Sources of Vaccine Information

Sources of information on the Covid-19 vaccine for young adults included peer-reviewed academic journals, the CDC, doctors, experiences of others, and data and statistics. Participants also trusted individuals or groups (e.g., vaccine developers and other medical professionals) for information about the vaccine because they are held accountable for the information they provide. Most of the information participants had received on the Covid-19 vaccine was related to the vaccine's effectiveness and side effects. Some participants had heard rumors of magnets and microchips in the vaccine.

*"I got a lot of information from everywhere and all sorts. I mean, I heard the, 'It's got a 5G chip in it, and you're going to be a transducer,' or whatever, and then, "If you get it, you'll never be able to get pregnant," and then also get the information that your local health departments, government health departments, and then federal health departments are also putting out. Then you also see people sharing stuff on Facebook. And so I definitely got all sorts of information about it, but the sources that I trust are definitely my local and federal health departments being like, 'Here's what we know. Here's what we're trying to figure out. We're keeping you as informed as possible,' so."*

Conversations with anti-vaccine family members caused some participants to be more hesitant to receive the vaccine. Many participants felt their conversations with family become exhausting when family members were more politically charged over the subject, and especially when political beliefs were involved, often found conversations unproductive as family members had made up their minds and were unwilling to change their position. However, two participants became less hesitant and more willing to get the vaccine after talking to loved ones and roommates in the medical or STEM fields. One unvaccinated participant is not going to get the vaccine because it is not FDA-approved.

*"I was just going to say that, personally, with something that has become so politically charged, I don't feel like I can trust any media outlet at this point. There are definitely some that I feel more inclined to trust, but I just feel that because, at the end of the day, they're just trying to make money and have headlines, I don't like that motive, and so I need to look for other sources that are actually about science and not just about people trying to get as many clicks on their article as they can or as many views on their show because it just seems like there's a lot of room for over-exaggeration or perhaps under-exaggeration and misinformation."*

## Logistics of Receiving the Vaccine

Many participants felt it was challenging to schedule an appointment to receive the vaccine early on, either feeling confused or noticing that available spots filled up quickly. However, many thought it became easier to get a vaccine as time progressed, and for those who did not want to receive the vaccine, it became more challenging to avoid. Some suggested making the scheduling website easier to navigate, making scheduling more accessible for those who are not tech-savvy, and improving the website to accommodate slower internet speeds – as it was often challenging to schedule an appointment quickly before it filled. Out of those who had been vaccinated, some preferred the Johnson & Johnson vaccine as it is a single-shot vaccine. Most, however, did not have a preference for a vaccine and were willing to take whatever was offered.

*"It seems really easy now to get the vaccine, but I wanted to get one pretty immediately, so it was actually really hard to do that. I waited for the day that the openings opened in March, and I went to the websites for the U of U and Nomi and these other ones, and all their slots were pretty much full for like a few weeks, and at some point, my girlfriend got a text from her brother who's a pharmacist. She's like, 'Yo, we got two slots. Get over here.' And they rushed over there to get the shots. And so it was kind of like you're hunting for this pretty much all the time. You wake up at 5:00 AM. That's what I did. I woke up at 5:00 AM and went to Target's website and refreshed the page a bunch until a slot opened up. So it was kind of a mess back in late March, early April, that kind of thing. But it seems real easy now."*

*"[I]t would be really nice if, instead of kind of the lottery style that they're doing for vaccines, where it's like, 'Okay, whoever has the fastest internet, yay, you get a vaccine. And if your computer decides that it's not going to work, then too bad for you' – I don't like that system, and I feel like it makes it really inaccessible, especially for elderly people because they don't have the technology and the skills to do something like that."*

## Other Considerations

Some participants expressed uncertainty about the future, such as not knowing whether they would need a booster shot or when the next vaccine will come (Covid-19 related or otherwise). A few participants discussed their belief that the vaccine does not need to be political and want others to be kind and compassionate toward one another.

## Next Steps

HERO Project will continue to publish reports summarizing focus groups held with Utahns of various communities and identities. These reports will help to inform the state's reflection, evaluation, and adaptation of their pandemic response with regard to public perception, concerns, and experiences receiving the Covid-19 vaccine.

# Acknowledgments

Leading the HERO Project are Stephen C. Alder, PhD; Adam Looney, PhD; and Matt Samore, MD. The project is funded by the State of Utah in coordination with the Governor's Office of Management and Budget and the Utah Department of Health.

Senior advisors to the project are Taylor Randall, MBA, PhD; Natalie Gochnour, MS; and Michael Good, MD. The Project team is Andrew T. Pavia, MD; Julio Delgado, MD, MS; Adam Hersh, MD; Krow Ampofo, MD; and Tom Greene, PhD. The following teams and centers supported the project:

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Jian Ying, PhD  
Chelsea Allen, PhD  
Andrew Redd, PhD  
Molly Mcfadden, MS  
Ben Brintz, PhD  
Tyler Bardsley, MS  
Yue Zhang, PhD  
Jincheng Shen, PhD  
Zhining Ou

## **CTSI Qualitative Research Core**

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Susan L. Zickmund, PhD

## **Marriner S. Eccles Institute for Economics and Quantitative Analysis**

Nathan Seegert, PhD  
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## **University of Utah Health Clinical Operations**

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Maddison Dillon  
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The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints generously contributed the use of their parking lots and buildings to support mobile testing for this project. In addition, we thank the HERO Project's field team that has staffed and supported countless testing events across the state. We also appreciate the support of the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences of the National Institutes of Health under Award Number UL1TR002538.

This report was developed by the Sorenson Impact Center at the University of Utah's David Eccles School of Business in partnership with the HERO Project leadership. Sorenson Impact works with public, nonprofit, and private sector stakeholders to develop, structure, and mobilize capital for innovative and data-driven approaches to difficult social and public health challenges. This report was written by Meredith Muller, Austin Hendrickson, and Allison Nicholson.

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