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# COVID-19 and Vaccines

## How Should We Keep Our Communities Safe?

**A**s the United States slowly emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic, many questions remain about what communities should do over the long run to keep people safe, get their local economies moving again, and prepare for future outbreaks.

At least 600,000 Americans have died of the coronavirus—nearly as many US deaths as in all 20th-century wars—while millions of others have been ill or hospitalized and often left with serious lingering symptoms. The US economy took an estimated \$16 trillion hit, and only repeated federal payouts kept many American workers afloat.

With the rollout of vaccines in early 2021, the US gained some control of the pandemic, and states and communities began reopening. However, this has raised questions about science, personal freedom, and what we owe one another.

- The government cannot compel people to get the shot. Some states, such as Louisiana and North Carolina, are instead offering scholarships and chances at cash prizes as incentives.
- Employers can require vaccination, and some do, especially hospitals and long-term care facilities, but many others do not.
- More than 500 colleges and universities are requiring students to be vaccinated before they return to school, but some states have banned such a requirement for state universities.

Many communities will be living with COVID-19 for some time, perhaps permanently. How should each community handle life under COVID-19, with some people vaccinated and others not?

Some see these vaccines as necessary, not only for their own health, but to ensure the health of their whole community. They believe that as many people as possible should

get vaccinated for the same reasons their parents had them vaccinated in childhood against diseases such as polio, which once disabled or killed thousands of Americans each year.

Others, however, say that vaccination, above all things, should be an individual choice—people should have the right to control what they put in their bodies. Many question whether, as a nation, we have overreacted to COVID-19, seriously damaging our economy and threatening the personal freedoms Americans cherish.

Some take the view that we should accept that many people will remain unvaccinated and turn our attention to whatever steps are necessary to protect the most vulnerable in our communities. In this view, the best way for communities to move forward is to be vigilant about the virus and practical about what can be done.

Communities will need to weigh all these concerns.

This issue advisory presents three options for moving forward, each coming from a different perspective and each reflecting a different set of ideas about what should be done. Most people will find something to agree with in all three approaches, but each also has trade-offs, risks, or drawbacks that need to be taken into account and worked through.

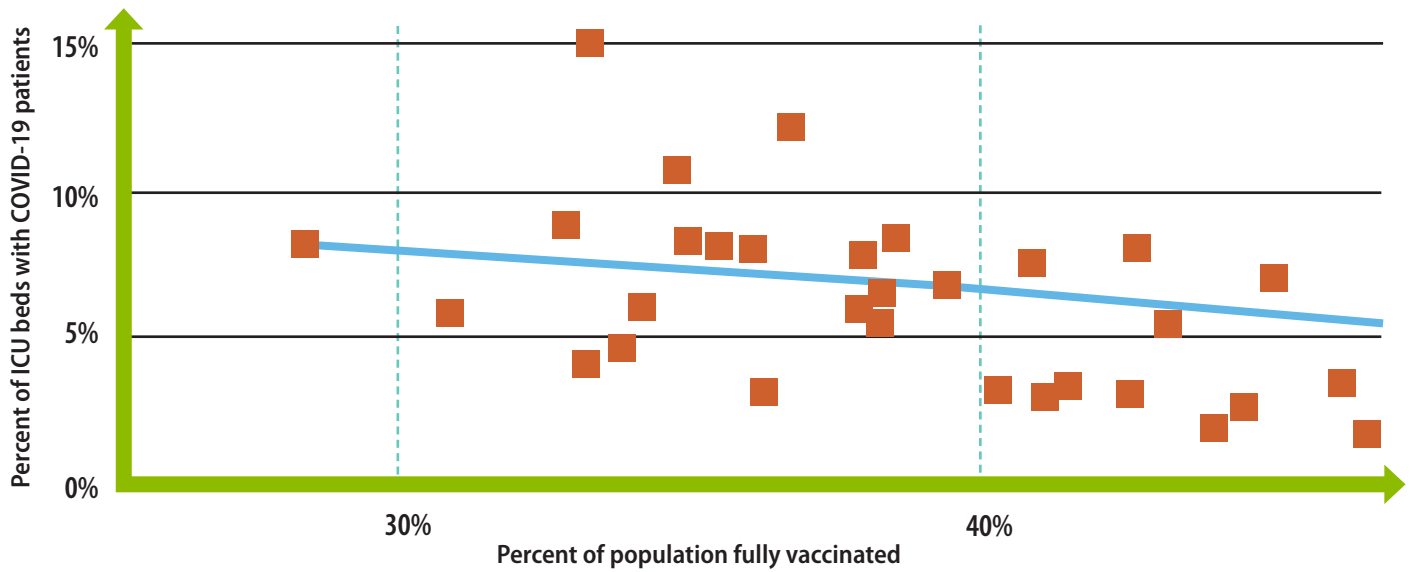
In thinking about different ways to approach the problem, we will consider such questions as:

- How much should we change our lives to adapt to the virus?
- What responsibilities does each of us have to our neighbors?
- How should we weigh the community's health against the need for more people to go back to work?
- How much weight do we put on reaching consensus and avoiding the controversies and divisions that may emerge?

These are not the only possible options, nor the only questions. They are starting points for weighing alternatives and reaching a sound judgment.

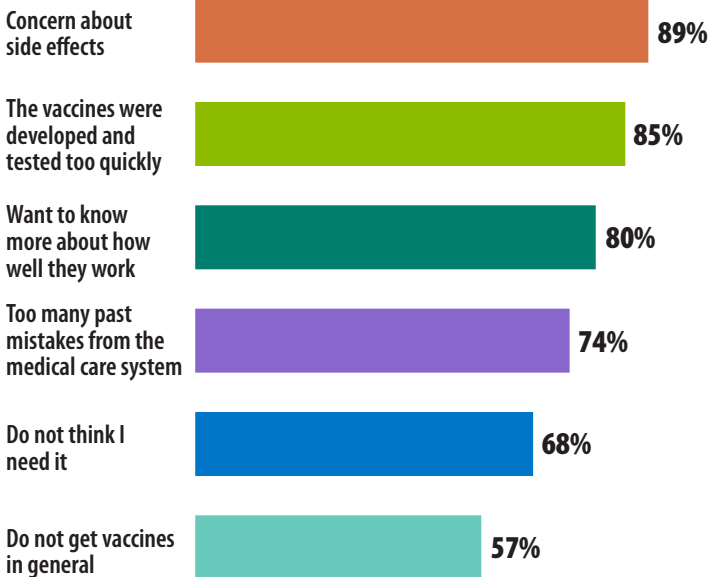
## States with Lower Vaccination Rates Have More COVID-19 Patients in Intensive Care.

Each orange square represents one state.



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (June 13, 2021)  
 Credit: Aleszu Bajak/USA TODAY

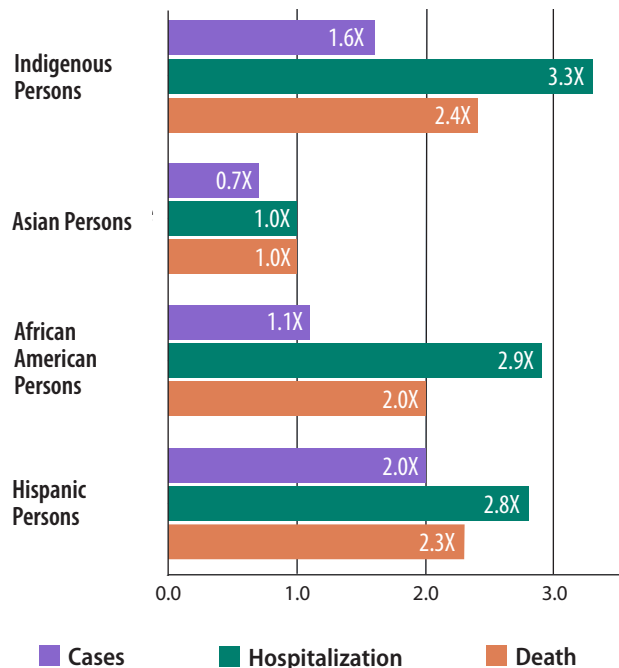
## US Adults Who Say They Probably/ Definitely Will NOT Get a COVID-19 Vaccine Give a Variety of Reasons.



Source: Pew Research Center (February, 2021)

## Some Groups of Americans Are at Higher Risk from COVID-19 Than Others.

Rate ratios compared to White, non-Hispanic persons



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021)

## Option One: Preserve Individual Choice

**Our nation prizes personal freedom, and nothing is more personal than deciding what we are willing to put in our bodies.** Requiring a vaccine would be an encroachment on that freedom. It is vital that we protect people's right to make their own medical decisions, even if there might be a risk in the decision they make.

### A Primary Drawback

**The more unvaccinated people there are, the more risk to others and the greater the chance that more dangerous versions of the virus will emerge.**

Actions	Drawbacks
Prohibit employers from requiring COVID-19 vaccinations.	Outbreaks caused by unvaccinated workers could force businesses to shut down again and hurt the local economy.
Ban colleges and universities from requiring vaccinations.	Because colleges bring so many people together in enclosed spaces for hours at a time, this is especially risky.
Bar local businesses, such as restaurants and fitness centers, from asking customers whether they are vaccinated.	Other customers may stay away if businesses can't assure them that everyone is vaccinated.
Customers can boycott restaurants and businesses that require vaccinations.	This could hurt small business owners, who are just trying to balance all their customers' needs.
<b>What else? What could we do, especially as a community?</b>	<b>What's the trade-off if we do that?</b>

**Eighty percent of all COVID-19 deaths have been among people age 65 and older; 95 percent of all deaths were among those 50 or older.**

—AARP and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

## Option Two: Get Everyone Vaccinated

**We should use whatever means available, either incentives or employer requirements, to get shots into as many arms as possible.** Vaccines against measles, polio, and other diseases have saved countless lives and reduced suffering. A vaccine for COVID-19 is no different.

### A Primary Drawback

**This is highly intrusive on people's freedom to choose what goes into their bodies.**

Actions	Drawbacks
Require teachers and first responders to be vaccinated.	The people who took these jobs didn't sign away their personal freedoms.
Provide incentives, such as cash or tax breaks, to anyone willing to be vaccinated.	This is unfair to millions of Americans who have already been vaccinated.
Require that children in K-12 schools, pre-schools, and day care centers be vaccinated as vaccines become available for these age groups.	The risk of severe illness from COVID-19 for children is too low to justify this intrusion on families' personal freedoms.
Churches can require vaccinations to attend services.	This is an intrusion upon religious freedom. In crisis times, people need faith more than ever.
<b>What else? What could we do, especially as a community?</b>	<b>What's the trade-off if we do that?</b>

**States with the lowest vaccination rates have more COVID-19 patients in hospital intensive care units, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the US Department of Health and Human Services.**

—USA TODAY, June 16, 2021

## Option Three: Protect the Vulnerable

**We should focus our efforts on protecting the most vulnerable people in the community,** including people of color, the elderly, the immunocompromised, the poor, and others. In many communities, the vaccination rate is unlikely to rise much more. In the long-term interest of public welfare, we should accept the existence of COVID-19 and its new variants.

### A Primary Drawback

**Essentially giving up on vaccinations increases the risk from large numbers of unvaccinated people and may trigger future outbreaks and resulting lockdowns.**

Actions	Drawbacks
Maintain mask mandates in schools, offices, and public places as an easy way to protect public health.	Requiring masks is unfair to the vaccinated, who deserve to enjoy greater freedom.
Keep up widespread COVID-19 testing, especially in schools, state universities, prisons, and other public institutions.	This is an enormous, time-consuming burden on facilities already struggling with tight budgets.
Create intensive contact-tracing programs to get outbreaks under control when they occur.	Contact tracing is intrusive, far more labor-intensive, and less effective than vaccination.
Homeless shelters and similar places with vulnerable populations can require vaccinations.	This discriminates against the homeless and others who have just as much right to personal choice as anyone.
<b>What else? What could we do, especially as a community?</b>	<b>What's the trade-off if we do that?</b>

**Black Americans are twice as likely to die of COVID-19 as Whites; Latinos are 2.3 times more likely to die as Whites.**

—US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

## About This Issue Advisory

As the nation slowly returns to what may be a new normal, one thing is clear: COVID-19 is still here. Are vaccines the answer for all of us? This advisory is designed to help people deliberate together about what we should do for ourselves and what we owe our communities. The three options presented here reflect different ways of understanding what is at stake and shed light on the critical tensions in what we hold most valuable.

### Ground Rules

- Focus on the options and actions we can take nationally and in our communities.
- Consider all options fairly.
- Listening is just as important as speaking.
- No one or two individuals should dominate.
- Maintain an open and respectful atmosphere.
- Everyone is encouraged to participate.

## Holding a Deliberative Forum

### 1. Introduction

Review ground rules.  
Introduce the issue.

### 2. Connect to Issue

Ask people to describe how the issue affects them, their families, or friends.

### 3. Consider Each Option

Consider each option one at a time.  
Allow equal time for each.

- What is attractive?
- What about the drawbacks?

### 4. Review and Reflect

Review the conversation as a group.

- What areas of common ground were apparent?
- What tensions and trade-offs were most difficult?
- Who else do we need to hear from?

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This issue advisory was prepared for the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI) in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation. National Issues Forums issue guides are used by civic and educational organizations interested in addressing public issues. These organizations use the guides in locally initiated forums convened each year in hundreds of communities. Recent topics have included rebuilding the economy, immigration, health care, and mass shootings. For more information on the National Issues Forums, visit the website: [www.nifi.org](http://www.nifi.org).

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ISBN: 978-1-946206-79-4

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## How Should We Keep Our Communities Safe?



### Community Forum Worksheet

NOW THAT YOU'VE HAD a chance to participate in a forum on this issue, we'd like to know what you're thinking. Anonymous responses will be included in summary reports on the forums and in research to help us better understand how people are thinking about current issues. Here is a reminder of actions you discussed in your forums:

- a. Require teachers and first responders to be vaccinated.
- b. Maintain mask mandates in schools, offices, and public places.
- c. Prohibit employers from requiring COVID-19 vaccinations.
- d. Keep up widespread COVID-19 testing, especially in schools, prisons, and other public institutions.
- e. Bar colleges and universities from requiring vaccinations.
- f. Churches can require vaccinations to attend services.
- g. Homeless shelters and similar places with vulnerable populations can require vaccinations.
- h. Provide incentives, such as cash or tax breaks, to anyone willing to be vaccinated.
- i. Customers can boycott restaurants and businesses that require vaccinations.
- j. Create intensive contact-tracing programs to get outbreaks under control when they occur.
- k. Bar local businesses, such as restaurants and fitness centers, from asking customers whether they are vaccinated.
- l. Require that children in K-12 schools be vaccinated.

1. Which **three** actions above (a-l) do you most strongly support? \_\_\_\_\_

2. Which **three** actions above (a-l) do you most strongly oppose? \_\_\_\_\_

3. Are there any actions above you still feel **unsure** about? \_\_\_\_\_

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4. What else could be done at the community, state, or national level to address this problem?

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5. Did you talk about aspects of the issue you hadn't considered before?

Yes

No

If so, please explain. \_\_\_\_\_

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6. Were there ideas or proposals that you tended to favor coming into the forum that you now have second thoughts about?

Yes

No

If so, please explain. \_\_\_\_\_

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**After you have filled this worksheet out, please give it to your moderator, email it to [forumreports@nifi.org](mailto:forumreports@nifi.org), or mail it to National Issues Forums Institute, 100 Commons Road, Dayton, OH 45459.**

**This worksheet is also available online at [www.nifi.org/questionnaires](http://www.nifi.org/questionnaires).**