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# Vaccinate LA Report: Listening and Learning from the Community

Founded in April 2021, VaccinateLA is an initiative that brings together partners within the community, at USC and other hospitals. Our goal is simple: provide education and resources to help reduce barriers that keep Los Angeles residents from getting the COVID-19 vaccine.

## BACKGROUND & OUR RESPONSE

Communities of color in Los Angeles and around the country have been especially impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. They have experienced challenges like unemployment and financial troubles, housing instability and homelessness, racism, and food insecurity. We also see slower rates of vaccination among Latinos, Blacks/African Americans, and children that are 12-17 years old and eligible for the vaccine. These issues are leading to health disparities in communities of color.

As a starting point, it was critical that we first listen and learn from these communities. We designed our focus groups with that idea in mind and conducted nine focus groups with 62 participants during a nine-week period between June and August 2021. These focus group participants included three groups: 1) Black and African-Americans in South LA; 2) Latinos in East LA, and 3) parents in these communities who are concerned about sending their children back to school. The following report provides a summary of the key themes we heard during these focus groups.



## Main Themes from South LA Focus Groups:

- Crime and civil unrest more pressing than COVID-19 concerns
- Lack of trustworthy information about vaccines
- Logistical barriers to accessing the vaccine
- Motivations for vaccination



## Main Themes from Parent Focus Groups:

- Concerns about COVID-19 vaccine safety
- Pressure of balancing multiple responsibilities as a parent
- Desire to hear factual information from trusted sources
- Need for improved access and incentives



# CRIME AND CIVIL UNREST MORE PRESSING THAN COVID-19 CONCERNS

For members of a South LA housing project, crime and civil unrest were on their minds more than getting the vaccine.

Other focus group participants brought up medical racism and mistrust as reasons not to get vaccinated. They weren't convinced that having people of color administer the vaccine was the best approach, either.



“Killings and safety are higher priority than COVID-19 in the community.”

“Several neighbors don't have papers and that's what they're afraid of.”

“Mental health is needed, and money is needed.”



“My generation is not easily pacified. It's not just about the vaccine – it's so much more. What is being changed in the community? It's a community issue, not just a vaccine issue. I don't want a free sandwich and things like that. I know it will help the COVID thing, but we will still be poor and homeless. Now that there is a vaccine, you can't just come to the hood when you want votes and when you want vaccines taken. When the government needs Black people, the government runs to the hood to get what they need from Black people.”



# LOGISTICAL BARRIERS TO ACCESSING THE VACCINE

To reduce existing barriers, people cited practical solutions such as: less reliance on technology to schedule an appointment, offering childcare, improving vaccination convenience (location and timing), being driven and/or accompanied to vaccine appointments, and receiving incentives.

They also had ideas for how to get people connected to truthful information: easier access to doctors; information in popular media; door-to-door campaigns; sharing of experiences between vaccinated and unvaccinated people (or those who experienced severe symptoms); and hearing from “celebrities of color,” like those from local businesses, faith and community leaders, and elected officials.

Focus group participants cited practical barriers to getting vaccinated that included:

- Lack of interest in the vaccine
- Vaccination sites being far from home
- Scheduling conflicts
- Easy access to fake vaccine cards
- Inexperience with technology and not knowing how to schedule an appointment
- "Poor planning" on the part of government and health officials to get Black people vaccinated



## MOTIVATIONS FOR VACCINATION

People cited many reasons for wanting to get vaccinated: wanting life to be normal again, seeing family and friends, and wanting to travel. Some people had been personally exposed to COVID-19 or had someone in their family get sick, which made them want to get the shot. One-on-one conversations with “voices of reason” such as their doctors, pastors or members of the church, family and friends also helped people make the decision to get vaccinated. They were also motivated by vaccine requirements at school or work, and seeing information at vaccination sites in their native language.

# RESULTS FROM PARENT FOCUS GROUPS

With back-to-school in full swing, parents have unique questions and concerns about vaccinating their adolescents (aged 12 years and older). We conducted four focus groups with 28 parents during the first week of August 2021.

Parents in our focus groups were stressed and worried about how to keep their children safe and healthy. Some of their concerns included:

- New variants (like the Delta Variant)
- Vaccine side effects
- Worries about being part of an experiment
- That it was approved too quickly
- Whether it is effective
- How it affects other health conditions.

Some parents in our focus groups shared concerns that other members of the community did not believe the pandemic was real, or did not feel they needed the vaccine because they already got COVID-19 and recovered. Other parents also shared frustration over having to practice certain preventive measures, or feeling like they'd be forced into taking a vaccine because of the mandates.

Parents agreed with other community members about the need for local vaccination clinics in trusted and accessible community sites, such as parks and churches. Many of them felt incentives would be successful and suggested incentivizing children directly to motivate them or their parents.

Parents had differing opinions on whether mandates would help, or whether these were not appropriate.



# KEY TAKEAWAYS

These listening sessions have enabled the community to share their feedback with us. We learned who they view as trusted messengers, and who they turn to for information, comfort and guidance. We learned that they want to return back to normalcy and are tired of misinformation. Ongoing problems with racism and crime are on their minds, along with how to keep their families safe. Parents who participated in our sessions are burned out and confused.

Going forward, we will use feedback from these focus groups to design and deliver relevant and culturally-tailored information, put together town halls for people to express their concerns and ask questions, and help us reduce barriers to getting the shot -- like arranging for transportation to vaccine sites, offering incentives, and providing childcare.

**For more information, please contact:  
Laura Stoddard, [VaccinateLA@usc.edu](mailto:VaccinateLA@usc.edu)**

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