

Public trust in the CDC falls during coronavirus pandemic

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Public trust in the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has fallen during the coronavirus pandemic, with the decline bringing overall population-level trust in the agency to the same lower level of trust long held by Black Americans about the agency, according to a new

RAND Corporation study.

Surveys done among a representative group of Americans in May and October of 2020 show about a 10% decline in trust of the CDC over that period.

In contrast, the same research found that public trust in the U.S. Postal Service and the Federal Emergency Management Agency increased significantly over the period, despite those agencies facing their own challenges.

"The Biden administration will have an uphill battle in rehabilitating trust in the CDC at this critical junction in the coronavirus pandemic," said Michael Pollard, lead author of the study and a senior social scientist at RAND, a nonprofit research organization. "A key challenge in the months ahead will be to identify who will be viewed as trusted messengers regarding vaccines and public health policies."

The study found that non-Hispanic white and Hispanic respondents reported significant declines in trust in the CDC, while the changes were not statistically significant for non-Hispanic Black or "other race" respondents.

"There is remarkable consistency and convergence in reported levels of trust in the CDC across these subgroups after the declines," Pollard said. "Lack of trust among Black Americans has been a well-publicized concern regarding the COVID-19 vaccine rollout, and the convergence in lower levels of trust across race/ethnicity highlights a key challenge that the CDC now faces."

Black Americans have historically held a low level of trust in the CDC and other health institutions, widely seen as a legacy of past racism in the nation's health system.

RAND researchers surveyed a representative sample of more than 2,000 Americans in May 2020, asking to rate their trust of the CDC, the USPS and FEMA on a scale of 0 to 10. Most of the participants were surveyed again in October 2020. All participants were part of the RAND American Life Panel, a nationally representative internet panel.

The survey found that trust in the CDC fell from 7.6 in May to 7 in October. Meanwhile, trust in the Postal Service rose from 6.9 in May to 7.7 in October; trust in FEMA rose from 6.4 in May to 6.7 in October.

Drop in trust of the CDC was particularly significant among people who intended to vote for a candidate other than Joe Biden in the 2020 [presidential election](#) or did not intend to vote at all, suggesting that views of the CDC are now strongly politicized. Similar politicization was not observed for FEMA or the USPS.

"The [public trust](#) in federal government agencies has never been as important as during the current COVID-19 pandemic, yet public suspicions of scientific experts and distrust of government institutions are increasing for a variety of reasons," said Lois Davis, co-author of the report and a senior policy researcher at RAND. "Reasons for this include a blurring of the line between opinion and fact, and access to more sources of conflicting information."

Researchers say one strategy that may help the CDC rebuild [trust](#) and depoliticize the public's views of the agency is to ensure that the public understands the scientific rationale for policy changes and guidance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Provided by RAND Corporation

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