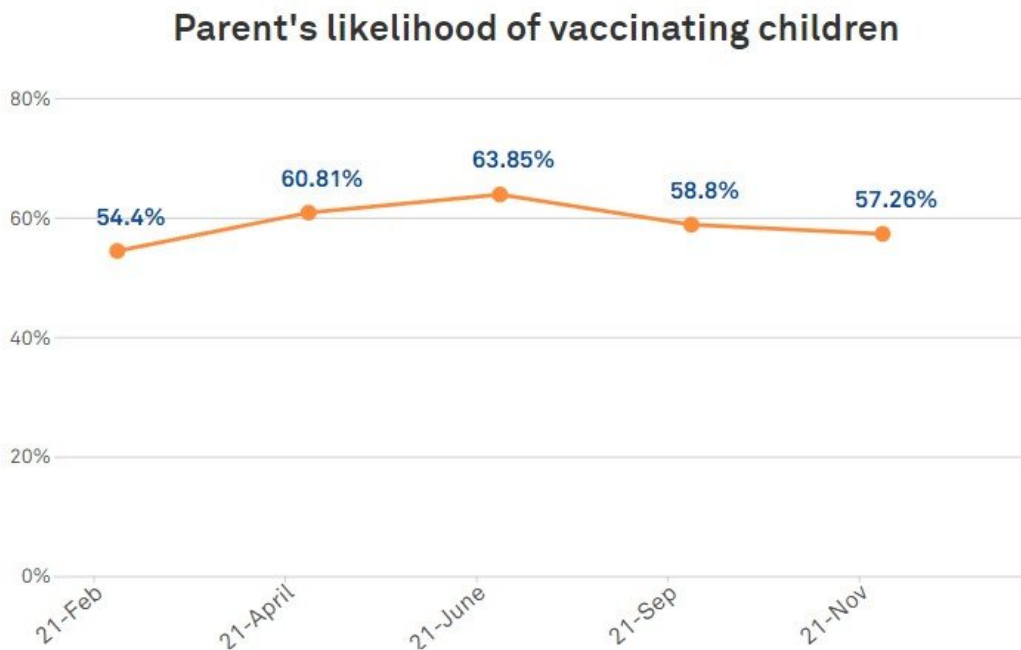


Parental enthusiasm for teens' COVID-19 vaccines is waning

December 15 2021, by Peter Ramjug



Credit: [COVID States Project](#) Credit: Eunice Esomonu/Northeastern University

After an initial wave of enthusiasm among parents to have their children vaccinated against COVID-19, there has been a noticeable uptick in parental resistance since June that is contributing to a slowing of the teen vaccination rate, a newly released study says.

The proportion of vaccine-enthusiastic [parents](#) (defined as those who have either had their children vaccinated, or say that they are likely to do so) dropped to 57 percent in November from 64 percent at the start of the summer, according to a [U.S. study](#) by the COVID States Project, a collaborative effort by researchers from Northeastern, Harvard, Northwestern, and Rutgers.

"That decline is striking to me," says David Lazer, a university distinguished professor of political science and computer science, and one of the study's authors. "We went through a rapid process of parents vaccinating their children, and now we're hitting a slow point (with teens) much sooner than we did with adults."

The [online survey](#) involved more than 3,000 parents in the U.S. and accounted for differences in age, race, education level, and political affiliation.

It found that vaccine reluctance was especially acute among Republican parents, young mothers, and people who live in rural parts of the country. White people, at 51 percent, have the lowest proportion of parents of any racial group to say that their teenagers had been vaccinated. Asian and Hispanic parents, at 72 percent and 62 percent, respectively, had the highest likelihood of having vaccinated children.

The Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine has been authorized for 16- to 18-year-olds for about a year, while those in the 12- to 15-year-old category were approved in May of 2021. Combining both age groups, the survey found that as of November 2021, 55 percent of parents of 12- to 18-year-olds said either all or some of their adolescents have received at least one shot. That has plateaued since September 2021, when it was 54 percent.

The Northeastern-led survey also queried the parents of five- to 11-year-olds, who became eligible for their shots in early November, one day

before the study launched. It found that 27 percent of all parents reported that their children had already received at least one injection.

But unlike the white parents of 12- to 18-year-olds who were the most skeptical of immunizations, Black parents of five- to 11-year-olds were the most hesitant for the younger age group.

What explains dwindling enthusiasm overall among some moms and dads? It's likely the same mechanisms that are driving hesitancy toward the shots in general, researchers say.

People remain concerned that the vaccines are just too new, and there hasn't been strong messaging on the fact that the underlying mRNA technology has been around for a long time but was only applied very quickly for the coronavirus, according to Alauna Safarpour and Krissy Lunz Trujillo, postdoctoral researchers at Northeastern's Network Science Institute who worked on the study.

"People don't want to risk their child's health on something that they see as experimental," Safarpour says.

Another possible factor: Parents may not perceive the threat of COVID-19 to be as great for children as for themselves. "Kids statistically have less complications or hospitalizations compared to other age groups," says Trujillo.

The onus on getting the word out to parents about the safety of vaccines lies mainly with [primary care physicians](#) since they hold the most sway, as prior Northeastern research studies have shown.

"Pediatricians are going to be really important here, but also insurance companies, and of course, the White House," says Safarpour.

The Biden administration has run into several legal roadblocks with its vaccine mandates for hospital workers, large private businesses, and federal government contractors. That leaves a potential pool of tens of millions of unvaccinated people should the court bans become permanent. The Justice Department is challenging the temporary curbs.

In the Senate, two Democrats—Jon Tester of Montana and Joe Manchin of West Virginia—joined all 50 Republicans to overturn President Biden's vaccine or testing mandate for private businesses with 100 or more employees. It was a chance for Republicans to frame the administration's efforts to increase vaccinations as federal overreach.

It's unclear if the measure will be brought up in the House, but if it were to pass the lower chamber it would likely be vetoed by Biden.

One concern that has begun to crop up is that if the courts strike down a COVID-19 vaccine mandate, it could pave the way to eliminate other mandatory childhood vaccinations that have been around for decades, researchers warn.

"There might be a spillover effect on anything related to a public health mandate," says Trujillo. "That's a huge concern that we need to think about sooner rather than later."

More information: Kristin Lunz Trujillo et al, The COVID States Project #71: Childhood COVID-19 vaccine uptake and intentions, (2021). [DOI: 10.31219/osf.io/cu4jz](https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/cu4jz)

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