

# Urban-rural vaccination divide underscores need for change, according to study

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Visible gaps between rural and urban COVID-19 vaccination rates highlight the need for tailored health responses, University of Otago researchers argue.

Results of the first study to analyze vaccination uptake in rural versus

urban settings during the peak period of New Zealand's national vaccination rollout in 2021 found that different population groups had varying levels of vaccine uptake.

Lead author Talis Liepins, Ph.D. candidate in the Department of General Practice and Rural Health, says the findings suggest opportunities for improvements in vaccination delivery models for rural and urban communities, and further highlights the urban-rural divide when it comes to equitable health care.

"It is important we advance general awareness around equity of access for rural populations and how health interactions for [rural communities](#) differ from urban communities," he says.

The study, [published](#) in *Epidemiology and Infection*, used a national dataset of 4.3 million health service users.

"By the end of the study period there was a clear urban-rural gradient apparent for all [ethnic groups](#), with greater rurality associated with lower levels of vaccination uptake," Liepins says. "Rurality further exacerbated the lower vaccination rates for Māori."

The researchers also found "considerable variance" in uptake between rural older and rural younger people; with the rural urban differences much more apparent in those aged less than 45 years.

Co-author Professor Garry Nixon, Head of Rural Section in the Department of General Practice and Rural Health, says these differences, visible across different population groups, suggest perhaps different barriers to access: "This further emphasizes the importance of health policy responses tailored to meet the needs of rural populations."

The study is the first of three exploring the COVID-19 [vaccine](#) rollout in

rural Aotearoa New Zealand. The studies aim to help show how effective the rollout was for different rural populations, identify the barriers and facilitators and guide future policy decisions.

"Our ultimate aim is ensuring equitable vaccination programs, coverage, and population protection in the future. Policymakers and program funders need to be aware of the urban-rural divide and work to address it through policy development, service or program development, and funding rural services to meet the needs of the communities they know so well," Professor Nixon says.

**More information:** Talis Liepins et al, Rural–urban variation in COVID-19 vaccination uptake in Aotearoa New Zealand: Examining the national roll-out, *Epidemiology and Infection* (2024). [DOI: 10.1017/S0950268823001978](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0950268823001978)

Provided by University of Otago

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