



Vaccine Attitudes Focus Groups: Rural Utahns

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The [Utah Health and Economic Recovery Outreach \(HERO\) Project](#) began in May 2020 as a collaborative statewide testing and analysis project to understand the community-based spread of Covid-19. The goal of the HERO Project is to collect and utilize high-quality local data to help inform decision-makers seeking to guide Utah's citizens and economy through a safe return to normalcy. One year later, the project team is wrapping up its reporting on community testing, impacts of Covid-19 on Utah businesses and consumers, school testing, and vaccine uptake, impact, and implications. This report summarizes and synthesizes focus groups related to vaccines. More information on the HERO Project's past and current work can be found in the project's [previous reporting](#).

Fifteen residents of rural Utah communities participated in two focus groups, one with seven people and one with eight, each approximately an hour and 20 minutes long. The focus groups took place in late spring and early summer of 2021. Researchers from the University of Utah Department of Internal Medicine's Qualitative Research Core worked on behalf of the HERO Project team to identify key themes from the focus group discussions, which formed the foundation for this report.

Key Takeaways

The participants in the rural cohort generally reported good experiences with vaccines and mentioned very little vaccine hesitancy. Fourteen of the fifteen participants had received the vaccine. Some participants experienced changing attitudes about the vaccine, with some feeling more comfortable and confident about the vaccine after reading about the technology. Generally, the participants felt that getting vaccinated would help life return to normal, warrant traveling again, and give them the ability to visit with others.

Covid-19 Impacts and Likelihood of Exposure

- For some, the pandemic heavily impacted their lives, causing them to stay secluded at home, stop visiting/seeing others, or start remote work. For others, the impact was minimal, and they continued their usual activities.
- While some participants felt a minimal exposure risk, others felt a high risk either because of their job, from grocery shopping, due to their own "irresponsibility," or because of who they lived with.

Vaccine Attitudes

- Some participants noted the initial difficulty to sign up for the vaccine, and that signing up may have been harder for folks who are "less tech-savvy."
- Participants mentioned trusted sources for vaccine information such as Dr. Fauci, organizations like the CDC and WHO, and other reputable scientists and medical doctors.
- Participants identified benefits of the vaccine, including the ability to be social and see loved ones again, a feeling of returning to "normal," better mental health, not having to wear masks, and protection for themselves and others.
- The risks discussed were mainly about the side effects of receiving the vaccine (e.g., sore arm, body aches) and the blood clots associated with the Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

Covid-19 Impacts and Likelihood of Exposure

Rural residents were asked questions regarding the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on their lives and their feelings about their likelihood of exposure. Some participants had fairly insignificant changes to their lives, like decreasing the number of activities they participated in.

"Well, for my family, we had to cancel a cruise. We weren't very happy about that.[...] But we haven't changed our lifestyle a lot, other than what we're forced to. We still travel to see our kids, go out to eat, everything we can. We just live life normally. Washed our hands a lot more."

Others, however, made substantial changes that may last long after the height of the pandemic.

"It did change how I live life. My wife and I travel a lot. We had to postpone one trip three times for her 60th birthday. But it also changed me, I think, forever. And I now don't go out and eat. I order out the food and bring it home, and I think that will continue for a very long time. And there were other aspects of it, the way people reacted to it, that really kind of changed my perspective on the world and how to live my life."

The participants in both focus groups all detailed varying likelihoods of exposure to Covid-19: some felt a minimal exposure risk (e.g., working from home, not seeing many people), while others felt a high risk because of their job, from grocery shopping, due to their own "irresponsibility," those they lived with, or other factors.

"I was very likely. I had to continue working. We were considered essential workers. Continued working, I was actually exposed a couple of times. Never did get it, but I was exposed a couple times."

Vaccine Attitudes

Many of the participants favored vaccines, and most regularly receive vaccines when needed, except for the flu vaccine (describing challenges including remembering to do so and perceiving it as ineffective). Participants described concerns about the vaccines including its quick and "experimental" development, previous negative reactions to vaccination, concerns about interactions with other medical conditions, and potential long-term effects.

"Well, I had a little bit of hesitance. I had a little bit of hesitancy about getting the vaccine because I was concerned about the downstream consequences that I wasn't sure they knew about yet. And so, every time I hear that something has happened, it's like, "Oh, boy. Is this going to be it?" But I am really, really glad that I have it. It's sort of given me my life back."

"...given the low vaccination rates here in Utah, particularly in southern Utah, I don't feel safe at all. I mean, I still wear a mask. I went to Smith's today, and maybe 10% of the people were wearing masks, and one-third of the population in Utah has gotten two shots. So people are taking this very lightly here. And as somebody mentioned, the aspect of altruism is not being played at all, because variants can spread around."

Attitudes on the Benefits and Risks of Getting the Vaccine

All but one participant believed that the vaccine would not create 100% protection from getting Covid-19, but that it would minimize the chance of having a severe case. In addition, the participants cited several benefits associated with the Covid-19 vaccine, such as:

- Being able to socialize with others more freely
- Being able to travel, both for pleasure and business
- Getting back to “normal”
- Ability to protect those that are severely immunocompromised
- Knowing that it will keep them from becoming severely ill with Covid-19 and infecting others
- Hoping society learns from the crisis and realizes our vulnerability to pandemics and viruses
- Decreasing the chance of infecting others
- Removing the need to wear masks
- Enabling the elderly to feel safe and able to go out in public again
- Feeling less anxious when out at the grocery store or smaller spaces

“Personally, I guess the tangible benefit I associated with it is that my likelihood of catching, getting it, and getting affected by it or passing it on is lowered. And then the intangible or secondary benefit is that I feel safer doing activities that I've avoided or modified how I do so far.”

Within one of the focus groups, there was a discussion on the risks participants associated with the Covid-19 vaccine. The participants cited possible allergic reactions, sore arm, fever, body aches and chills, and blood clots. The other focus group had less of a discussion on risks because the conversation turned political—resulting in one of the participants leaving the meeting.

“ Well, I've already said I feel like it could lower my immune system, which is doing a fabulous job by itself. But secondly, I don't want to open a can of worms everywhere, but I—[Name of another participant] hit the nail on the head for me when he said, 'You've got to trust who it's coming from,' and I don't trust Fauci. I'm sorry, I don't. We did all of our studying and I even talked to an epidemiologist here in southern Utah at the beginning of this, and I think it's been blown out of proportion. I think big cities are more at risk than the rural. I think we should have been treated a little bit differently. I think we could have done things a little bit differently. And if it comes from Fauci, I don't believe it.”

Receiving the Vaccine

All of the participants except one had been fully vaccinated or received at least one dose. The participant who had not received any vaccine doses said they are waiting because of a lack of adequate information on the vaccines.

“...given the low vaccination rates here in Utah, particularly in southern Utah, I don't feel safe at all. I mean, I still wear a mask. I went to Smith's today, and maybe 10% of the people were wearing masks, and one-third of the population in Utah has gotten two shots. So people are taking this very lightly here. And as somebody mentioned, the aspect of altruism is not being played at all, because variants can spread around.”

Many of the participants said the state had done a great job getting the vaccine distributed to those who want it. However, some participants noted it was difficult to sign up initially, and the website had some “roadblocks” that created accidental appointment cancellations. Some mentioned that signing up may have been harder for folks who are “less tech-savvy.”

“I felt like there were a lot of barriers to signing up. And I work in tech, so it's not a big deal for me to refresh the page kind of thing to be able to sign. But for folks that maybe are less tech-savvy, it felt like there was a gamification to being able to get a slot through the Health Department and also in order to schedule-- say it went to Smith's Pharmacy, you'd have to create an account to see if they had any slots. So there just seemed like there were too many barriers to scheduling for a mass vaccination like that”

One participant loved how many different places were offering the vaccine. Moreover, another participant said they would like to see more advertisement that the vaccine is free and people without insurance can get it.

Vaccine Information

There were various sources of information that participants said they trusted to receive news about Covid-19 and the vaccines. Some sources mentioned were Dr. Fauci, ProMed, CDC, WHO, NIH, scientists and virologists on YouTube and MedCram, medical podcasts, and Marketplace from American Public Media. One participant cited a podcast named “This Week in Virology.” Multiple participants discussed their inclination to read medical research and view data visualizations rather than rely on traditional news media sources.

“I think along with not interested in someone coming at it from a political standpoint, also moneymaking standpoint. So I don't trust the news and the media very much because I feel like they're there to make money and so they sensationalize a lot of things that may not be true. I don't feel like I get the facts anymore on the news.”

Some participants remembered specific advertisements as part of various vaccination campaigns, while others did not have any specific recollection. Regardless of their previous exposure to advertisements, participants discussed the information they wished they had seen about the vaccine.

“I think it'd be interesting to know how long it had been in production because I've heard multiple things, like it was in production before the pandemic started, just because COVID is a disease that's not just 19, [laughter] but that they had been in production. I'd like to know more statistics. I really like forming my own conclusions. I have a lot of statistics thrown at me, and I'd like to actually be able to see the real numbers and just how long-- how many people for-- anyway. I just would like more information about that kind of stuff.”

Other concerns about information regarded the financial rewards for companies like Pfizer and Moderna and the potential for Covid-19 boosters in the fall of 2021 and/or beyond.

Next Steps

HERO Project is publishing additional reports of focus groups held with health care workers, high school students, multiple demographic groups, and women. These reports will help to inform the state's reflection, evaluation, and adaptation of their pandemic response with regard to public perception, concerns, and experiences receiving the Covid-19 vaccine.

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