

- Insights from twelve focus groups

Messaging to Missourians about the COVID-19 Vaccine

CONDUCTED FOR MISSOURI FOUNDATION FOR HEALTH

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**PERRY
UNDEM** + **betty&smith**

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— BACKGROUND: MEET THE TEAM



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— BACKGROUND AND METHODS

Missouri Foundation for Health sponsored 12 focus groups with diverse Missourians to understand their perceptions about the COVID-19 pandemic, the vaccines, and messages about getting vaccinated. The focus groups were conducted in two phases: mid-December and mid-January. The evolving context shaped the conversations.

Black Adults

- Black adults ages 18-30 in the St. Louis metro area (12/16)
- Black parents in the St. Louis metro area (12/17)
- Black adults 55+ in the St. Louis metro area (1/13)
- Black adults in rural areas across the state (1/14)

Latino Adults

- Latino parents in the St. Louis metro area (12/21)
- Latino adults across the state, in Spanish (1/14)
- Latino adults 55+ across the state (1/19)
- Latino adults in the St. Louis metro area born outside the US, in Spanish (1/19)

White Adults

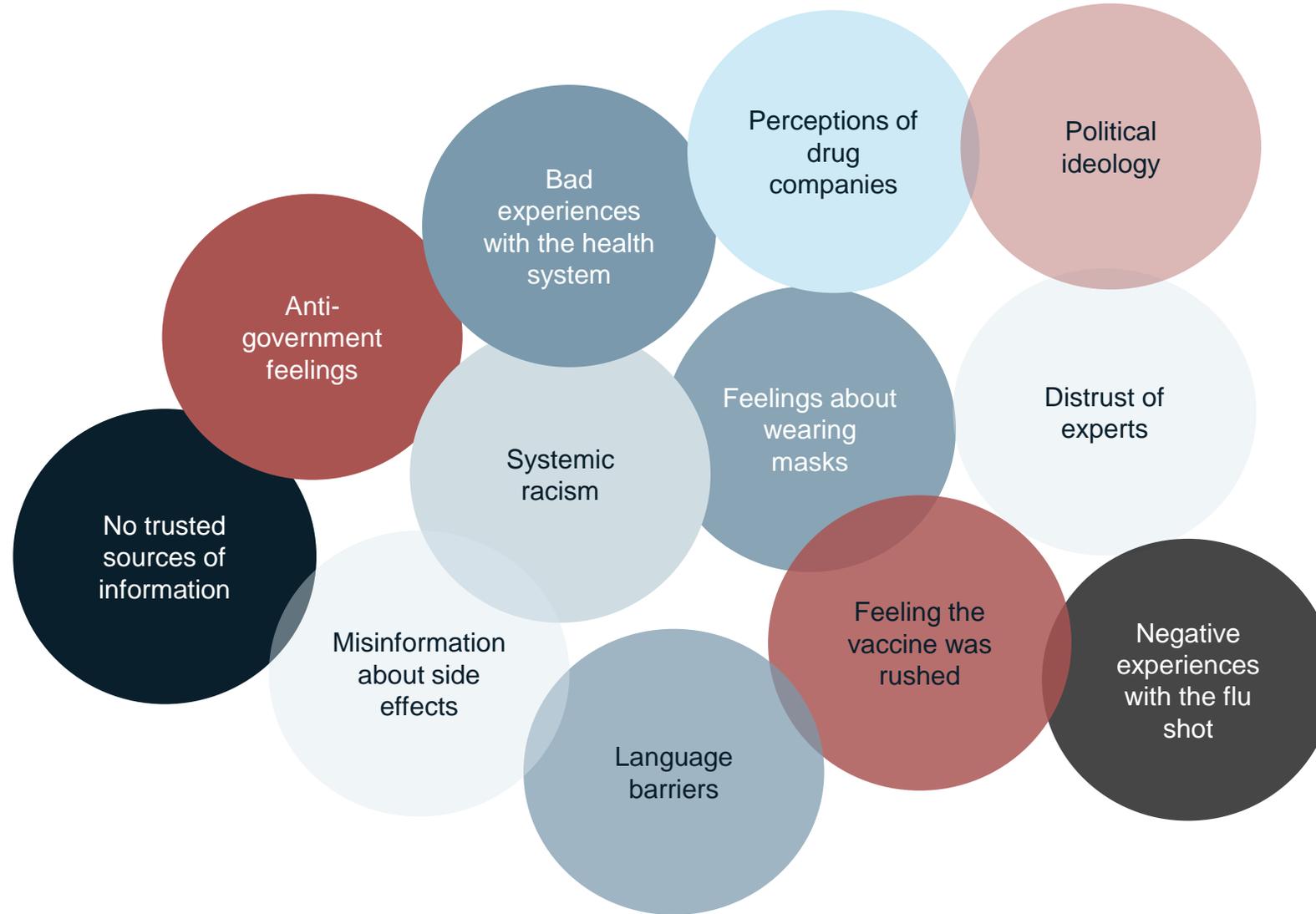
- White parents in Springfield (12/16)
- White adults ages 55+ in the St. Louis metro area (12/17)
- White adults in rural areas across the state (12/21)
- White conservative adults across the state (1/13)

We are thankful to the community-based organizations throughout the state that helped with recruitment. We also used professional recruiters to identify research participants. There was a mix of gender and education levels, and these discussions included some individuals with disabilities and chronic illnesses. There was also a mix of political ideology (note: the conservative voters were mostly concentrated in the white focus groups – namely the rural group and the one specifically with conservative voters. The other two white focus groups were more politically balanced).

Findings.

— BARRIERS TO VACCINE

Many **factors** seem to be intersecting with feelings about the COVID vaccine.



— DIVIDES ON OPENNESS TO COVID VACCINE

Some Missourians seem **readier** to get the vaccine...

- **Older study participants:** They feel more at risk of the virus, are more comfortable with vaccines, and miss loved ones.
- **Urban residents:** They feel impacted by the virus, tended to be more progressive (in our focus groups), have more trust in the health system (some), and trust the information they are receiving about the vaccine.
- **Those with underlying health risks:** They feel vulnerable to the virus, feel isolated right now, and want to get back to normal.
- **Individuals connected to the health system:** They have the most trust in the health system, may have more accurate information, and know people already vaccinated.
- **Those with friends/family members who've had COVID:** They have seen impacts firsthand and are more afraid of the virus.

— DIVIDES ON OPENNESS TO COVID VACCINE

Some Missourians have more **questions, concerns, and are more conflicted** about getting the vaccine or have decided against it...

- **Younger participants:** They may not feel at risk, and less likely to have changed their behaviors.
- **Rural residents:** Until recently, felt COVID-19 was a “city problem” and didn’t really feel impacted.
- **Conservative individuals:** Feel the process has been politicized, have more doubts about the vaccine, and have less trust in government/information.
- **Some Black adults:** Suffered from mistreatment by the health system, impacts of systemic racism, don’t want to be guinea pigs, and do not feel government/the health system really cares about them.
- **Some Latino adults:** Feel forgotten by the health system, often last to receive accurate information, information is not in Spanish, less access to the health care system and providers, and immigration status is a barrier for some.

Key Communities.

— BLACK ADULTS

Systemic racism and poor treatment by the health care system impact how many Black Missourians think about the COVID vaccine.

- Experiences with systemic racism shape how many Black Missourians feel about the vaccine. There is distrust of systems that have historically mistreated their communities.
- Many Black participants feel the health care system has caused them harm or ignored them. They warn that these feelings are widespread.
- Some mention having had negative encounters with the health system, including a perceived sense of neglect. This feeling is causing some to have a “wait and see” attitude.
- There is also skepticism about the speed of vaccine development for COVID (and the profit-motive of the drug companies). A few point out that decades later, there are still no cures for diseases like diabetes or sickle cell, which disproportionately impact Black communities. They wonder why there is a rush now – and are wary of outside efforts to push them to get vaccinated.

— BLACK ADULTS

Black participants are looking for a better relationship with the health system.

- Some participants feel Black people are very community-oriented...that they are more likely to get the vaccine for family, neighbors, and others. Messages about protecting family as well as helping the community are particularly powerful.
- There is also a sense that Black adults want to feel valued in a system that has repeatedly let them down. This involves ongoing trust-building with providers, but also health officials and the government. The COVID vaccine might provide a chance to rebuild and reshape relationships with these stakeholders.
- Acknowledgement of – and efforts to address – systemic racism is something many would like to see as part of this effort.
- Neighbors, friends, church members, pastors, others from their communities who have been vaccinated... these are the best messengers. Primary health providers are also strongly trusted.

— LATINO ADULTS

Latino communities are feeling acute impacts of the pandemic.

- Latino participants have seen COVID impact their communities – many know people who have gotten sick or died.
- Some worry that the pandemic has worsened among Latinos because some (especially younger adults) are still socializing – they are lonely, don't have family nearby, etc.
- There is a sense their communities are left out of the health care system. That they are never prioritized. That they are the last to know. They worry what will happen to those without insurance or access.
- There is a feeling that undocumented individuals among them will find it hard to get the vaccine, will not have accurate information, will be left behind.
- Misinformation was a big topic in these focus groups – particularly information coming from home countries. Latino adults are concerned that accurate information is not getting to them and is not in Spanish.

— LATINO ADULTS

Latino adults focus on the importance of family, community in ending this pandemic.

- Community-themed messages have power with Latino adults.
- Many also tell us that family is a motivating factor – “Family is everything.” Messaging about being vaccinated to “protect family” resonates with many in the groups.
- Seeing information and messages in Spanish right from the start will be important – they need to feel included in this effort.
- Since many may lack personal relationships with doctors, leaders in Latino communities will be important messengers as will word-of-mouth from friends and community members. Churches also are effective messengers for some Latino individuals who belong to church communities and a few mention employers.

— CONSERVATIVE ADULTS

Conservative adults talk about the **divergent political realities that have shaped views on the pandemic, mask wearing, and the vaccine.**

- Conservative participants speak to the skepticism that has surrounded the crisis since it began. They were the ones who most talked about the divisive political backdrop to the pandemic and the huge mistrust of experts and information sources – and how that is hindering efforts around the vaccine.
- Although many are taking the pandemic seriously, they are most likely to know family, friends, and other members of their communities who do not think it is real (or at least something not worth worrying about).
- Some feel that the pandemic, and now the vaccine, has been completely politicized. And a few think that fears about the virus, and now questions about the vaccine, were driven in part to undermine President Trump.
- They worry that many in their communities will not take the vaccine because of this politicized environment.

— CONSERVATIVE ADULTS

Personal choice is important, as well as distrust of the government and institutions.

Other themes also bubble to the surface among conservative participants:

- Fear of loss of personal choice. They don't want the vaccine to be mandatory, and bristle at suggestions that it may be required by government, businesses, employers, etc.
- Some express strong distrust of the government, media, and other sources of information. This extends to feelings about local government too.
- They feel like much of the news they see is biased, and are turning to alternative sources for news (i.e. podcasts, social media, etc.) about the pandemic. This is where some are hearing conspiracy theories about the vaccine, what's in it, and about side effects.

Some rural participants may now be feeling **more urgency** around COVID.

- Rural individuals feel the pandemic hit their communities later. Because of this, they think many in their area didn't take COVID seriously enough. It was viewed during the early months as an urban/city issue.
- By mid-January, rural study participants said they were being impacted. They now know people who have become sick from the virus and some said they have become more fearful.
- Still, they are concerned that there remain neighbors who don't view COVID as an urgent problem – “it's nothing more than the flu.” This means they see people without masks and not following other guidelines despite the spiking cases.
- Some are worried about vaccine uptake in rural communities as a result – they are concerned that since many are skeptical of COVID (or feel it's easy to socially distance where they live), individuals will simply decline to take the vaccine. Others feel uptake of the vaccine is more likely now that they are seeing and experiencing the pandemic firsthand.

Messages.

— TOP MESSAGE THEMES

Three **message themes** stand out across the groups. Here is why they are effective...

Back to normal

“Getting vaccinated is a key step to get back to normal, so that we can all hug our families, see our friends, get back to work, and get together again.”



- Back to normal means “seeing family again” for most
- It means the small things – going out for dinner, attending church, going to a movie, etc.

The vaccine will protect me and/or my loved ones from getting COVID

“Getting vaccinated is the best way to protect yourself and your family from getting COVID-19.”



- “Protection” is an important value in this discussion
- “Family” is also a driving force for getting vaccinated

A vaccine is not only about the individual, it is also about the whole community.

“If we’re going to beat COVID-19, it will take all of us. Getting the vaccine not only protects you, it protects your family, your neighbors, and your community.”



- Missourians feel that getting vaccinated is about more than self
- They want to do their part, support the community – it is about solidarity

— MESSAGE RATINGS

AVERAGE RATING 1-7
(7 = very good reason)

	White	Black	Latino
A vaccine is not only about the individual, it is also about the whole community. If we're going to beat COVID 19, it will take all of us. Getting the vaccine not only protects you; it protects your family, your neighbors, and your community.	5.6	5.5	6.7
Back to normal. Getting vaccinated is a key step to get back to normal, so that we can all hug our families, see our friends, get back to work, and get together again.	5.4	5.7	6.4
The vaccine will protect me and/or my loved ones from getting COVID. Getting vaccinated is the best way to protect yourself and your family from getting COVID-19.	5.5	4.7	6.6
Facts about the effectiveness of other vaccines. The development of the COVID 19 vaccines is a huge accomplishment. We now have the power to eradicate COVID 19 like we've done with other diseases like polio and smallpox.	5.3	5.0	5.9
Safe and effective. The COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective. Through a rigorous testing process, they are shown to have limited side effects, and are over 90% effective at preventing you from contracting the virus.	4.9	4.9	5.9
The science is sound (effectiveness rates; how it works). Both of the COVID-19 vaccines are more than 90% effective and were tested with tens of thousands of volunteers.*	5.2	4.5	5.9
Past reasons for mistrust are real and valid, here's how this is different. Some people have had bad experiences with the health system. It is reasonable to be skeptical. The COVID-19 vaccines have been rigorously tested and reviewed and are scientifically proven to work and get us back on the road to recovery.	4.9	4.6	5.4
The vaccine is accessible (physically and financially). The COVID-19 vaccine is free, and you will be able to get it at a convenient location in your community like a local pharmacy, clinic or even your workplace.	5.0	4.5	5.9
The vaccine is especially important for communities feeling disproportionate impact. Many in our community have been especially impacted by COVID-19 and deserve to be vaccinated to best protect ourselves. <i>[Black and Latino ONLY]</i>		5.1	6.2

*At the time of testing, Pfizer and Moderna were the FDA-approved vaccines.

— WHAT COULD MAKE A DIFFERENCE

**Here is what might make
Missourians **more open** to
getting vaccinated in the
upcoming months...**

- Knowing people who have been vaccinated, particularly people in their own circles
- Hearing about how distribution is being ramped up
- Hearing that the federal government is taking the pandemic more seriously
- Not hearing stories about bad side-effects, allergic reactions
- Having their questions about the vaccine answered by a reliable, neutral source
- Hearing that vaccines still work on COVID mutations
- Seeing COVID infection rates go down as more Missourians are vaccinated
- Hearing consistent messaging on vaccines

The best information source is...

my doctor

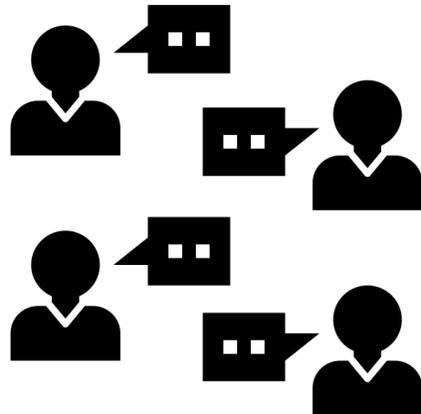


Other sources mentioned:

- CDC – a reliable source for many
- FDA – also a reliable source
- Dr. Fauci – most like him, but too political for some
- Church/religious leaders – for some adults who belong to these communities
- Federal government – not trusted right now. Some could be open to a “trust” reset under President Biden
- State government – a mix. For some, too political (especially the governor). Others, though, want to hear about the state’s plans
- Facebook/social media – although many say it is not a good source of reliable information, they acknowledge that people in their community turn to these sources

— IMPORTANCE OF WORD-OF-MOUTH

Word-of-mouth will shape perceptions around the vaccine.



- Beyond traditional messengers, like doctors or government agencies, word-of-mouth will be critical for Missourians.
- They look to those in their lives for information about the pandemic and are now doing so with the vaccine. What they hear from those around them really matters.
- It will be important for Missourians to hear positive stories from those who get vaccinated. This will go a long way in alleviating some concerns about side effects/potential health impacts.
- On the flip side, negative word-of-mouth stories about reactions to the shot could create real and long-lasting resistance. These concerns will be hard to overcome with traditional messaging since Missourians implicitly trust family and friends.

Communications Recommendations.

— CONSIDERATIONS FOR APPROACH

Meet people where they are.

- Times are unusual and uneasy
- Many people have been hard hit, but others have seen less change in their lives
- Information landscape is constantly shifting
- Health care decisions are personal
- Concerns and past experiences are valid

— CONSIDERATIONS FOR APPROACH

Invite dialogue.

- Encourage **trusted community-based messengers** to address questions and concerns.
- **Sequence messaging** to address misinformation and then encourage vaccination - to build trust and avoid driving demand ahead of schedule.
- People want information they can use. Stick to information that is more **direct, clear and transactional**.
- The vaccine's availability will be a moving target. **Encourage transparency**.
- People trust friends and family. Encourage those with a positive experience or story to **share it**.
- Consistently provide clear information (in language) on **where and when to get vaccinated** sending people to reliable and timely resources.

— CONSIDERATIONS FOR APPROACH

Effective Messaging Reminders

- Continue to remind consumers that the vaccine is **safe, tested and free**.
- Underscore the **benefit to the community**, particularly with Black and Hispanic audiences.
- Reference everyone's desire to get **back to life as we know it** – jobs, family gatherings, seeing friends, etc.

A Note About Personal Choice

Personal choice is an important value for Missourians. Remind people that getting vaccinated is their choice. While not a stand-alone message, a frame that highlights individual choice addresses concerns about requirements from employers or the government.

— CONSIDERATIONS FOR MESSAGING

Sample Message Frame

COVID-19 has had a big impact on our lives this year – whether it’s our health, finances or just the ability to do everyday things, like see family and friends.

Now that the vaccine is here, we all have questions. Now is the time to learn about it and decide what’s right for you and why. We all have different reasons. Getting vaccinated is the best way to protect yourself and your family from getting COVID-19. It’s also a key step to getting back to normal, so that we can all hug our families, see our friends, get back to work, and get together again. And, with so many at risk – our older parents, family and friends with chronic conditions – getting vaccinated can protect those who are near and dear to us. It’s safe and it works.

More than 1 million Missourians have been vaccinated already based on advice from their doctors and public health experts. It’s your choice. Find out more about the vaccine and where to get it at covidvaccine.mo.gov.

— ADDRESSING BARRIERS

Top Barriers

- The vaccine was too rushed to be effective.
- I'd rather see how the vaccine impacts others before getting vaccinated myself
- The vaccine will have negative side effects.
- The [federal] government cannot be trusted to tell the truth on vaccines.

Strategies to Address

- Share facts about the vaccine's safety – efficacy rates, rigorously tested, etc.
- Elevate the number of people in MO who have gotten vaccinated.
- Amplify positive stories – lack of side effects, impact on daily life, etc.
- Diversify validators to combat distrust – engage trusted community leaders, health care workers, friends and family, etc.

Thank you.

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