

# Vaccine hesitancy declines among faith groups

August 2, 2021

WASHINGTON (RNS)—A new survey finds vaccine hesitancy has fallen among Americans overall and among all religious subgroups in just three months.

The survey reveals many who once balked at vaccine now say they embraced inoculation against COVID-19 at the urging of faith leaders.

Many stalwart subsets of “vaccine refusers,” however, have barely budged, raising concerns as to whether they will ever get the shots.

The findings were released July 28 as a collaborative survey conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute and the Interfaith Youth Core.

Researchers framed it as an update to a similar poll conducted in March that highlighted sizable percentages of Americans at the time who exhibited vaccine hesitancy, which PRRI and IFYC define as people who say they will either “wait and see” before getting a vaccine or who will only get it if required.

## Overall decline in vaccine hesitancy noted

Researchers noted the number of vaccine hesitant Americans has shrunk significantly overall, dropping from 28 percent in March to just 15 percent in June, when the two organizations conducted their second survey.

The trend holds true for religious Americans, as well. In March, Hispanic

Protestants exhibited the highest rate of vaccine hesitancy at 42 percent. But the group has undergone a marked shift between March and June. Only 26 percent now report vaccine hesitancy, and overall vaccine acceptance jumped from 43 percent to 56 percent.

The change was even more dramatic among Hispanic Catholics, who increased their vaccine acceptance from 56 percent to 80 percent in that time. Other groups also have seen their vaccine acceptance jump 11-15 percentage points to rise above 70 percent, such as white Catholics (79 percent), other Christians (77 percent), the religiously unaffiliated (75 percent), and white mainline Protestants (74 percent).

Black Protestants are among those who have seen a marked increase in vaccine acceptors, rising from 49 percent to 66 percent. Vaccine hesitancy with the group also declined, dropping from 32 percent to 21 percent.

The upward trend was less pronounced among white evangelicals, although there was a notable shift: Vaccine acceptors in the group increased from 45 percent to 56 percent.

## **Faith-based initiatives make a difference**

Researchers highlighted the importance of faith-based overtures when it came to getting religious people vaccinated, particularly within communities of color. Among those who are vaccinated now, Hispanic Protestants (40 percent) and Black Protestants (30 percent) were especially likely to say that one or more faith-based approaches—such as forums on vaccine use convened by a local religious community or encouragement from a faith leader—helped convince them to get vaccinated.

Worship attendance also had an effect. Among those who attend religious

services and are vaccinated, most Hispanic Protestants (54 percent) and a sizable percentage of Black Protestants (42 percent) said faith-based overtures helped them embrace inoculation against the novel coronavirus. Among vaccinated Hispanic Catholics overall, 25 percent credited faith-based influences, a percentage that leaps to 45 percent among those who attend services.

As for those who remain vaccine hesitant, some groups show an increased willingness to heed faith-based encouragement. For example, white Catholics now are twice as likely to say they could be nudged into getting a vaccine via religious methods (31 percent) than earlier this year (15 percent).

## **Faith communities work with government officials**

Indeed, the shifts come in the wake of several efforts by religious communities to encourage vaccination among the faithful. Campaigns sometimes operated in collaboration with government officials.



A nursing student at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor participates in a COVID-19 mass vaccination event with Bell County Public

Health under the supervision of Michele Hackney, dean of the UMHB Scott & White School of Nursing. (UMHB Photo)

In Washington, D.C., several historically Black churches served as staging locations for vaccine drives, with leaders reaching out to parishioners and vaccinating clergy in public.

Several faith groups also partnered with the White House to encourage “movable” demographics to get vaccinated, and religious leaders from an array of traditions have canvassed their communities and hosted vaccination drives as part of a multifaith “Faith 4 vaccines” initiative.

The PRRI/IFYC poll was conducted prior to an escalation in pro-vaccine rhetoric among Republican officials in recent weeks. In a recent editorial, former Trump administration press secretary and current Arkansas gubernatorial candidate Sarah Huckabee Sanders, an evangelical Christian, implored people in her state to get the “Trump vaccine,” encouraging them to “Pray about it, discuss it with your family and your doctor.”

According to PRRI-IFYC, rates of vaccine acceptance were increasing even before the renewed push, rising from 45 percent in March to 64 percent in June. Rates among Democrats rose from 73 percent to 85 percent in that same time period.

## **Hard-core vaccine refusers stand firm**

But as vaccine acceptance rises and hesitancy continues to shrink, the number of vaccine refusers—people who say they will not get a COVID-19 vaccine—has changed little. The group now represents 13 percent of the U.S. population overall, a drop of just 1 percentage point since March.



Again, religious groups largely mimic national trends. For example, the number of religiously unaffiliated vaccine refusers did not change at all, holding steady at 12 percent. The same is true for white

Catholics (8 percent).

The percentage of vaccine refusers hovered around the same as March for Hispanic Protestants (from 15 percent to 17 percent), non-Christians (10 percent to 13 percent) and among members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (17 percent to 19 percent).

Jewish Americans also saw their vaccine refuser group grow (5 percent to 7 percent), although the community continues to exhibit the highest rate of vaccine acceptance overall (85 percent).

White evangelical Protestants remain the religious group with the highest percentage of vaccine refusers with 24 percent (compared to 26 percent in March).

While hesitancy declined overall among white evangelicals, those who are left now appear generally less likely to respond to religious appeals. In March, 38 percent of those in the group's vaccine hesitant cadre said faith-rooted overtures could compel them to get vaccinated, but that shrunk to 28 percent in June. The same pattern can be found among their vaccine refusers: 47 percent said religious approaches could change their mind in March, but only 32 percent say the same now.

There was, however, an increase in susceptibility among vaccine refusers who attend religious services, with 17 percent now saying they could be impacted by religious approaches compared with 7 percent in March.

And there are notable exceptions that buck the trend of a calcifying vaccine

refuser camp. Among Black Protestants, around 19 percent of the group were vaccine refusers in March, but only 13 percent said the same in June. Other Protestants of color also saw their vaccine refuser camp shrink from 20 percent to 15 percent, and “other Christians” dropped from 11 percent to 4 percent.