

As Virus Cases Rise, Another Contagion Spreads Among the Vaccinated: Anger

Frustrated by the prospect of a new surge, many Americans are blaming the unvaccinated. A tougher stance may backfire, some experts warn.



By Roni Caryn Rabin

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As coronavirus cases resurge across the country, many inoculated Americans are losing patience with vaccine holdouts who, they say, are neglecting a civic duty or clinging to conspiracy theories and misinformation even as new patients arrive in emergency rooms and the nation renews mask advisories.

The country seemed to be exiting the pandemic; barely a month ago, a sense of celebration was palpable. Now many of the vaccinated fear for their unvaccinated children and worry that they are at risk themselves for breakthrough infections. Rising case rates are upending plans for school and workplace reopenings, and threatening another wave of infections that may overwhelm hospitals in many communities.

“It’s like the sun has come up in the morning and everyone is arguing about it,” said Jim Taylor, 66, a retired civil servant in Baton Rouge, La., a state in which fewer than half of adults are fully vaccinated.

“The virus is here and it’s killing people, and we have a time-tested way to stop it — and we won’t do it. It’s an outrage.”

The rising sentiment is contributing to support for more coercive measures. Scientists, business leaders and government officials are calling for vaccine mandates — if not by the federal government, then by local jurisdictions, schools, employers and businesses.

“I’ve become angrier as time has gone on,” said Doug Robertson, 39, a teacher who lives outside Portland, Ore., and has three children too young to be vaccinated, including a toddler with a serious health condition.

“Now there is a vaccine and a light at the end of the tunnel, and some people are choosing not to walk toward it,” he said. “You are making it darker for my family and others like mine by making that choice.”

On Monday, Mayor Bill de Blasio of New York City ordered that all municipal workers be vaccinated against Covid-19 by the time schools reopen in mid-September or face weekly testing. Officials in California followed suit hours later with a similar mandate covering all state employees and health care workers.

The Department of Veterans Affairs on Monday required that 115,000 on-site health care workers be vaccinated in the next two months, the first federal agency to order a mandate. Nearly 60 major medical organizations, including the American Medical Association and the American Nurses Association, on Monday called for mandatory vaccination of all health care workers.

“It’s time to start blaming the unvaccinated folks, not the regular folks,” a frustrated Gov. Kay Ivey, Republican of Alabama, told reporters last week. “It’s the unvaccinated folks that are letting us down.”

There is little doubt that the United States has reached an inflection point. According to a database maintained by The New York Times, 57 percent of Americans ages 12 and older are fully vaccinated. Eligible Americans are receiving 537,000 doses per day on average, an 84 percent decrease from the peak of 3.38 million in early April.

As a result of lagging vaccination and lifted restrictions, infections are rising. As of Sunday, the country was seeing 52,000 new cases daily, on average, a 170 percent increase over the previous two weeks. Hospitalization and death rates are increasing, too, although not as quickly.

“We’re not out of the woods completely,” said Pastor Shon Neyland of Portland, Ore. Some vaccinated congregants are frustrated with those who refuse to get the

vaccine, he added. Tojo Andrianarivo for The New York Times

Communities from San Francisco to Austin, Texas, are recommending that vaccinated people wear masks again in public indoor settings. Citing the spread of the more contagious Delta variant of the virus, the counties of Los Angeles and St. Louis, Mo., have ordered indoor mask mandates.

For many Americans who were vaccinated months ago, the future is beginning to look grim. Frustration is straining relations even within closely knit families.

Josh Perldeiner, 36, a public defender in Connecticut who has a 2-year-old son, was fully vaccinated by mid-May. But a close relative, who visits frequently, has refused to get the shots, although he and other family members have urged her to do so.

She recently tested positive for the virus after traveling to Florida, where hospitals are filling with Covid-19 patients. Now Mr. Perldeiner worries that his son, too young for a vaccine, may have been exposed.

“It goes beyond just putting us at risk,” he said. “People with privilege are refusing the vaccine, and it’s affecting our economy and perpetuating the cycle.” As infections rise, he added, “I feel like we’re at that same precipice as just a year ago, where people don’t care if more people die.”

Hospitals have become a particular flash point. Vaccination remains voluntary in most settings, and it is not required for caregivers at most hospitals and nursing homes. Many large hospital chains are just beginning to require that employees be vaccinated.

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Even though she is fully vaccinated, Aimee McLean, a nurse case manager at University of Utah Hospital in Salt Lake City, worries about contracting the virus from a patient and inadvertently passing it to her father, who has a serious chronic lung disease. Less than half of Utah's population is fully vaccinated.

“The longer that we’re not getting toward that number, the more it feels like there’s a decent percentage of the population that honestly doesn’t care about us as health care workers,” Ms. McLean, 46, said.

She suggested health insurers link coverage of hospital bills to immunization. “If you choose not to be part of the solution, then you should be accountable for the consequences,” she said.

Mr. Perldeiner with his son, Arlo. “I feel like we’re at that same precipice as just a year ago, where people don’t care if more people die,” he said. Christopher Capozziello for The New York Times

Many schools and universities are set to resume in-person classes as early as next month. As the number of infections increases, these settings, too, have seen tension rise between the vaccinated and unvaccinated.

Recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on K-12 school reopening are tied to rates of community virus transmission. In communities where vaccination lags, those rates are rising, and vaccinated parents must worry anew about outbreaks at schools. The vaccines are not yet authorized for children under 12.

The American Academy of Pediatrics has advised that children wear masks in class when schools reopen. On Friday, school districts from Chicago to Washington began putting mandates into effect.

Universities, on the other hand, often can require vaccinations of students and staff members. But many have not, frustrating the vaccinated.

“If we’re respecting the rights and liberties of the unvaccinated, what’s happening to the rights and liberties of the vaccinated?” said Elif Akcali, 49, who teaches engineering at the University of Florida, in Gainesville. The university is not requiring students to be vaccinated, and with rates climbing in Florida, she is worried about exposure to the virus.

Some are even wondering how much sympathy they should have for fellow citizens who are not acting in their own best interest. “I feel like if you chose not to get vaccinated, and now you get sick, it’s kind of your bad,” said Lia Hockett, 21, the manager of Thunderbolt Spiritual Books in Santa Monica, Calif.

Understand the State of Vaccine Mandates in the U.S.

- **College and universities.** More than 400 colleges and universities are requiring students to be vaccinated for Covid-19. Almost all are in states that voted for President Biden.
- **Hospitals and medical centers.** Many hospitals and major health systems are requiring employees to get the Covid-19 vaccine, citing rising caseloads fueled by the Delta variant and stubbornly low vaccination rates in their communities, even within their work force. In N.Y.C., workers in city-run hospitals and health clinics will be required to get vaccinated or else get tested on a weekly basis.

- **Can your employer require a vaccine?** Companies can require workers entering the workplace to be vaccinated against the coronavirus, according to recent U.S. government guidance.

As the virus begins to spread again, some vaccinated people believe the federal government should start using sticks rather than carrots, like lottery tickets.

Carol Meyer, 65, of Ulster County, N.Y., suggested withholding stimulus payments or tax credits from vaccine refusers. “I feel we have a social contract in this country with our neighbors, and people who can get vaccinated and choose not to get vaccinated are breaking it,” Ms. Meyer said.

Bill Alstrom, 74, a retired innkeeper in Acton, Mass., said he would not support measures that would directly affect individual families and children, but asked whether federal government funding should be withheld from states that don’t meet vaccination targets.

Maybe the federal government should require employees and contractors to be vaccinated, he mused. Why shouldn’t federal funding be withheld from states that don’t meet vaccination targets?

Dorrett Denton eventually overcame hesitancy with advice from her doctor. Brittainy Newman for The New York Times

Though often seen as a conservative phenomenon, vaccine hesitancy and refusal occur across the political and cultural spectrum in the United States, and for a variety of reasons. No single argument can address all of these concerns, and changing minds is often a slow, individualized process.

Pastor Shon Neyland, who regularly implores members of his church in Portland, Ore., to get the Covid-19 vaccines, estimated that only about half of the members of the Highland Christian Center church have gotten shots. There have been tensions within the congregation over vaccination.

“It’s disappointing, because I’ve tried to help them to see that their lives are in jeopardy and this is a serious threat to humanity,” he said.

Shareese Harris, 26, who works in the office of Grace Cathedral International in Uniondale, N.Y., has not been vaccinated and is “taking my time with it.” She worries that there may be long-term side effects from the vaccines and that they were rushed to market.

“I shouldn’t be judged or forced to make a decision,” Ms. Harris said. “Society will just have to wait for us.”

Rising resentment among the vaccinated may well lead to public support for more coercive requirements, including mandates, but experts warn that punitive measures and social ostracism can backfire, shutting down dialogue and outreach efforts.

Elected officials in several Los Angeles County communities, for example, are already refusing to enforce the county’s new mask mandate.

“Anything that reduces the opportunity for honest dialogue and an opportunity for persuasion is not a good thing,” said Stephen Thomas, a professor of health policy and management at University of Maryland School of Public Health. “We are already in isolated, siloed information systems, where people are in their own echo chambers.”

Gentle persuasion and persistent prodding convinced Dorrett Denton, a 62-year-old home health aide in Queens, to be vaccinated in February. Her employer urged Ms. Denton repeatedly to be immunized, but in the end it was her doctor who persuaded her.

“She says to me: ‘You’ve been coming to me from 1999. How many times did I do surgery on you, and your life was in my hands? You trust me with your life, don’t you?’” Ms. Denton recalled.

“I said, ‘Yes, doctor.’ She said, ‘Well, trust me on this one.’”

Giulia Heyward contributed reporting from Miami, Sophie Kasakove from New York and Livia Albeck-Ripka from Los Angeles.