

The Detroit News

OPINION *This piece expresses the views of its author(s), separate from those of this publication.*

Opinion: Detroit parents don't trust COVID-19 vaccine, survey shows

Jeffrey Morenoff

Published 11:00 p.m. ET Aug. 24, 2021

With the new school year only two weeks away, students, parents, teachers and school administrators are preparing for the challenges of returning to school amidst a new wave of COVID-19 cases brought on by the Delta variant.

The Detroit Public Schools Community District recently announced an indoor mask mandate, and public health officials are warning about a fourth surge of COVID-19 in Michigan and urging all school staff and eligible students to be vaccinated. But in Michigan, only one-third of kids aged 12-15 have initiated a COVID-19 vaccine, and in Detroit, the coverage rate in this age group is under 20%, according to the state COVID-19 vaccine dashboard.

Why is vaccine uptake so low among youth? It may be because their parents are vaccine resistant. Recent data from the Detroit Metro Area Communities Study reveal that adults living with children are vaccinated at substantially lower rates (38%) than those living without children (70%). And unvaccinated adults living with children are twice as likely as those without kids to report that they will not be vaccinated in the future.

Indeed, vaccine hesitancy among parents likely helps explain the low vaccine uptake among children. According to the study data, children between the ages of 12 and 17 are over 10 times more likely to be vaccinated if the adult we surveyed in the same household was also vaccinated.

Conventional wisdom proposes that vaccine hesitancy could be stronger among adults living with children because younger adults are less likely to be vaccinated, and adults who live with children tend to be younger than those who do not.

But, we found that the vaccination gap between parents and non-parents is actually wider among younger adults, so age does not explain the hesitancy of parents.

Instead, our data indicate the reluctance of parents to accept the vaccine for themselves and their children is connected to their lack of trust in the vaccine, the healthcare system more generally, and the sources of information about COVID-19.

Adults living with children are also less likely to trust the validity of the information they receive about the pandemic from their doctors, the Centers for Disease Control, the news media and politicians.

Given their greater reluctance to be vaccinated and distrust in information about COVID-19, it might be tempting to characterize parents as being more skeptical of the pandemic as a public health threat, but we actually find the opposite is true.

In fact, adults living with children report feeling less safe about many public activities, such as going grocery shopping, going to the hospital or doctor, visiting with relatives or friends in their home and working outside the home.

The heightened concern that parents express about the risk of contracting the coronavirus suggests that their greater vaccine hesitancy could also be an expression of the caution they are exercising to protect the health of their families.

The upshot is that as school and health officials work to promote COVID-19 vaccination among students to ensure a safe return to the classroom, we need to look beyond the kids themselves and encourage the parents of school-aged children to also be vaccinated.

This multi-generational approach could both tamp down fears of the public health threat and be an important force in mitigating the rise in COVID-19 cases.

Jeffrey Morenoff is one of the faculty research leads for the University of Michigan's Detroit Metro Area Communities Study, professor of public policy and sociology, and research professor at UM's Institute for Social Research.