Over Time, More Black Americans Became Willing to Get COVID-19 Vaccines

COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy dropped more rapidly among African Americans than whites, yet their rates remain slightly lower.

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Over time, Black Americans became less hesitant to get COVID-19 vaccinations compared with their white counterparts, and yet they still see slightly lower vaccination rates, according to findings published in JAMA Network Open.

“Black individuals overcame their hesitancy more quickly,” the study authors wrote. “A key factor associated with this pattern seems to be the fact that Black individuals more rapidly came to believe that vaccines were necessary to protect themselves and their communities.”

African Americans became willing to get the COVID-19 vaccine, according to the authors, as a result of educational campaigns spearheaded by Black organizations and trusted African-American leaders and celebrities. For example, in the early days of the COVID-19 epidemic, sports legend Magic Johnson urged all minorities to take the virus seriously.

For the study, researchers surveyed 1,200 people each month between December 2020 and June 2021. At the beginning, 38% of Black respondents said they didn’t plan to get a vaccine; six months later, that number had dropped to 26%. Among white participants, vaccine hesitancy dropped 1% during the same period—from 28% to 27%.

This means that by the end of the survey, Black Americans were slightly less hesitant to get vaccinated than white respondents (26% said they didn’t plan to get the shot compared with 27% of whites).

And yet by looking at vaccination data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the study authors found out as of May 2021, African Americans slightly trail their white counterparts in getting COVID-19 vaccines. In fact, the data show that the percentage of White Americans who received at least one shot is 1.5 times that of African Americans.

Looking at the same CDC data, AARP.org points out that as of December 2021, 77.8% of white

Americans were fully vaccinated, compared with 76.2% of Black Americans.

This could be due in small part to age differences between racial and ethnic groups, the survey authors noted. In this case, fewer Black people than whites are 65 and older, the age group originally prioritized to get vaccinated.

The more likely cause of lower vaccination rates is that African Americans experience more disparities and barriers to health care, lead author Tasleem J. Padamsee, PhD, an assistant professor of health services management and policy at Ohio State University told AARP.

For example, she said, many Black people, especially those without health insurance, might not know the vaccines are free. Others might not be able to take time off work to get vaccinated.

“Something else is probably going on that’s holding Black Americans back from getting vaccines as often as white Americans do,” Padamsee said. “If it’s not about willingness, it’s usually about access barriers.”

In related news see “Faith Leader Who Promoted COVID-19 Vaccines Pivot to Fight HIV.” And the article “New Yorkers With HIV Are Less Likely to Be Vaccinated Against COVID-19,” which also details racial and ethnic dispartities in vaccination rates.

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