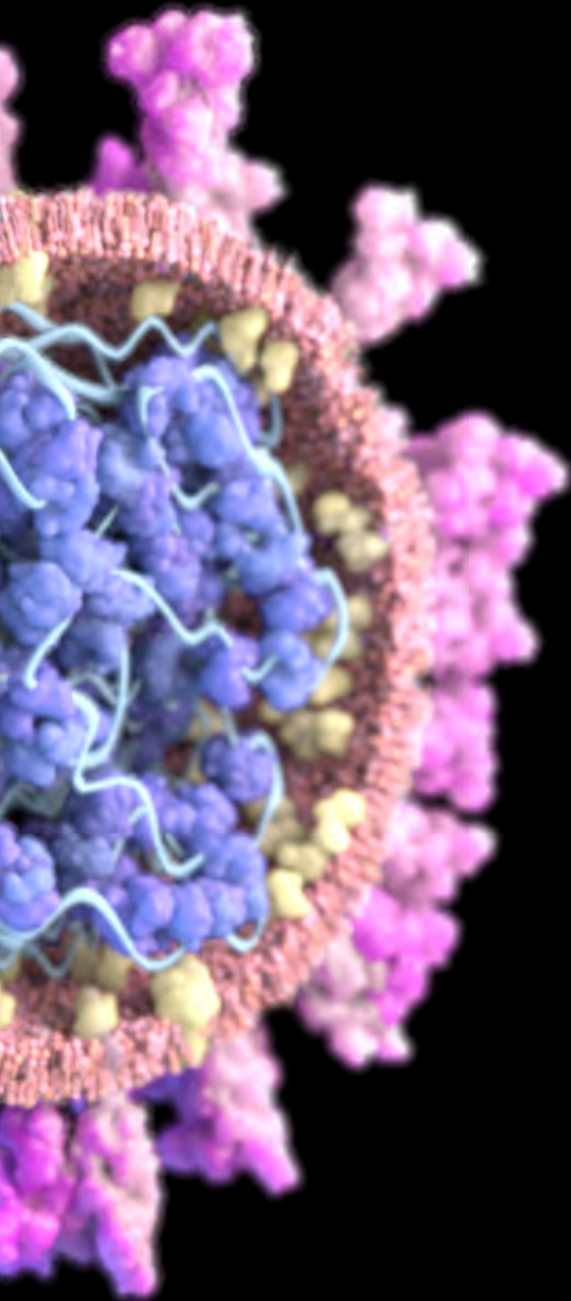




Health Equity and Vaccines

Understanding How the U.S. National Conversation
on Health Equity Impacts Vaccines

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The piece you're about to read is from Klick Health's Life (Sciences) After COVID-19 series, a collection of expert perspectives designed to inform and inspire the life sciences community for the coming changes and opportunities we anticipate as a result of this global health crisis.

We invite you to engage with a multitude of these viewpoints by seeking out other pieces from this series, including *Four Ways to Engage External Stakeholders in the Post-Pandemic World* and *A Digital Canary in the Coal Mine for New COVID Variant* at **covid19.klick.com**.

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As the U.S. Federal government makes unprecedented investments in vaccines related to the COVID-19 pandemic, health equity is at the center of this response and much of the national conversation. In late March 2021, the Biden Administration launched a long-awaited [vaccine public education campaign](#) to address vaccine hesitancy. This program creates a COVID-19 Community Corps of 275 national organizations that can serve as trusted messengers in their communities. In addition, the recently passed American Rescue Plan Act allocated [\\$10 million to ensure equal access to COVID-19 vaccines](#) in high-risk communities and to address vaccine hesitancy.

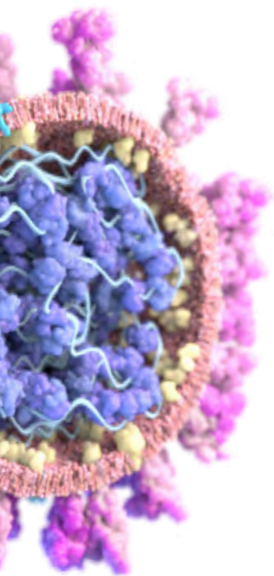
This POV will dive further into best practices around addressing vaccine hesitancy and how funds used for pandemic response can be used to boost health equity, bolster confidence in the immunization system, and strengthen public health infrastructure.

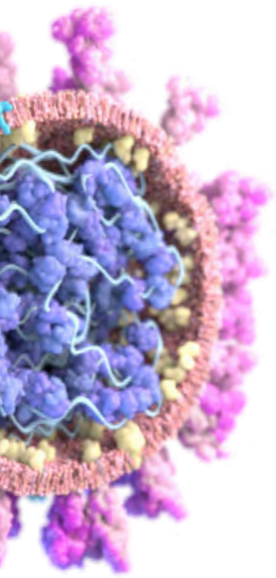
Pandemic Fuels Health Equity Efforts

As the novel COVID-19 pandemic altered all aspects of life in 2020, attention on the public health system, the economic effects of lockdowns, and the value proposition of vaccines became greater than ever before.



This was overlaid with the long-overdue recognition of systemic racism in American life, including in health care. The pandemic exposed and exacerbated disparities in access, treatment, and outcomes within the healthcare system, demonstrating innovative solutions were urgently needed. The high rates of COVID-19 infection, severe illness, and death among Black, Hispanic, Native American, Asian American/Pacific Islander, low-income, disabled, and rural communities created an environment where Americans could no longer look away from systemic inequality in American life.





Health equity is at the root of much of the national COVID-19 response. Amid the racial justice protests in summer 2020, extensive efforts were made to increase transparency and inclusion of racial and ethnic minorities in clinical trials for COVID-19 vaccines and treatments. As a new presidential administration came into power in early 2021, investing in health equity became paramount to instilling trust as the national COVID-19 vaccination campaign began. This is detailed in the Administration's [national strategy for pandemic response](#), which roots its goals in equity to achieve economic and social recovery.

The Biden-Harris Administration also named a [Health Equity Task Force](#), a diverse 12-person independent expert advisory board tasked with providing specific recommendations to the President to mitigate inequities caused or exacerbated by the pandemic and to prevent disparities in the future.

In April 2021, the CDC Director for the first time declared [racism a public health emergency](#). This follows the lead of the American Public Health Association, which reports that more than 170 local and state leaders and public health entities have declared racism a public health crisis or emergency.



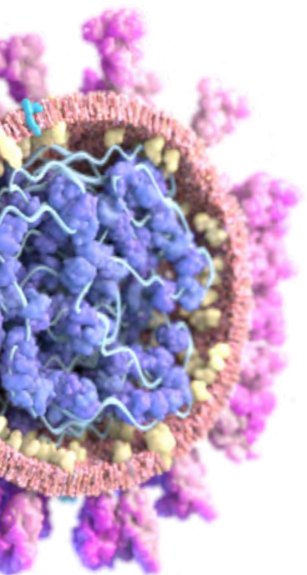


Public Funding and Vaccine Education Campaigns

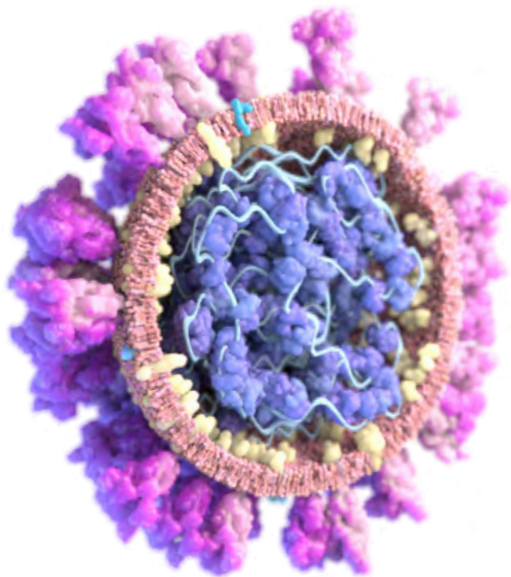
Amid this national effort, the public sector and private industry have invested considerable resources developing targeted campaigns to instill confidence in communities of color about COVID-19 vaccines.⁴

The [American Rescue Plan Act of 2021](#), signed into law in March, provides \$1.9 trillion in pandemic relief. This allocates \$1 billion for the CDC to invest in vaccine confidence, education, and confidence activities, including [\\$10 million to ensure equal access to COVID-19 vaccines](#) in high-risk communities and to address potential vaccine hesitancy.⁷ The Act also invests \$330 million for community health workers to bolster vaccine uptake in hard-hit communities, including expanding capacity for testing, contact tracing, training, and data collection. This includes developing community health workers as vaccine navigators to help make appointments and answer questions in culturally and linguistically appropriate ways.

Native American/American Indian communities experience some of the most dire health disparities across infectious and chronic diseases, with COVID-19 being no exception. The Rescue Plan allocates \$2.3 billion to the Indian Health Services for vaccine distribution and administration, testing and contact tracing, and public health workforce development. In late March 2021, the Biden Administration launched a long-awaited [vaccine public education campaign](#) called “[We Can Do This](#)”² to address vaccine hesitancy. This program includes mass media TV, radio, and digital ads; digital and social media assets; and fact sheets in eight languages. The campaign also draws on vaccine confidence best practices by partnering with 275 national organizations that can serve as trusted messengers in their communities, termed the “[COVID-19 Community Corps](#).”



The non-profit Ad Council and the [COVID Collaborative](#) launched the "It's Up to You"¹ campaign. This mass media campaign includes public service announcements featuring four former presidents and first ladies about the value of COVID-19 vaccination. The campaign also includes celebrities, media figures, and health experts, with specific assets and programs created for Hispanic audiences in Spanish. Focusing specifically on the Black community, Kaiser Family Foundation partnered with the [Black Coalition Against COVID](#) on "[Greater Than COVID: The Conversation](#)."³ This features videos with more than 60 prominent Black health experts and physicians to answer frequently asked questions, share information about the value of COVID-19 vaccines, personal stories about the pandemic, and their journeys as people of color in health care.



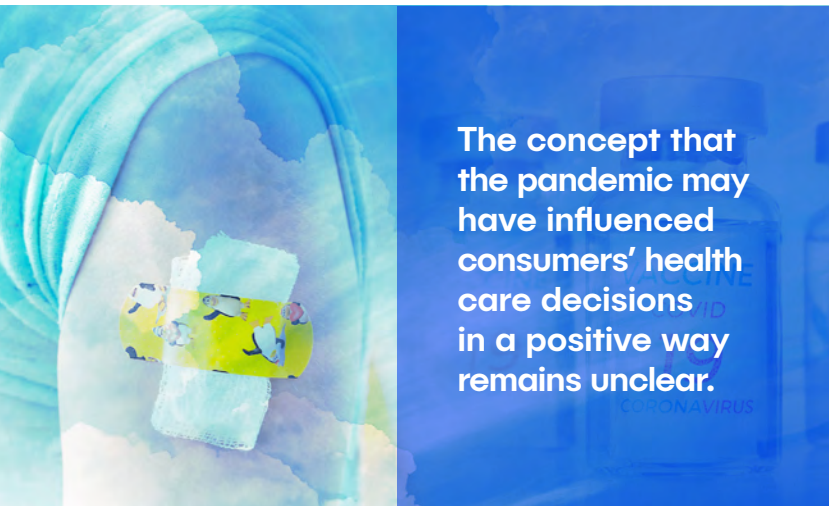
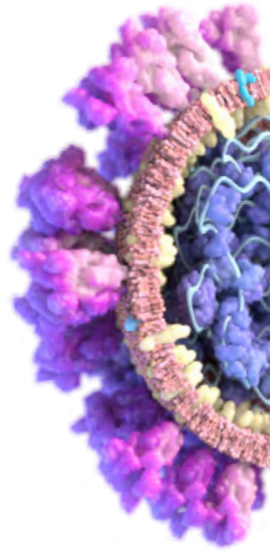
Vaccine Confidence After COVID

Among the many unknown effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, will these vaccine confidence campaigns change knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about routine vaccines for children and adults—and, ultimately, immunization rates?

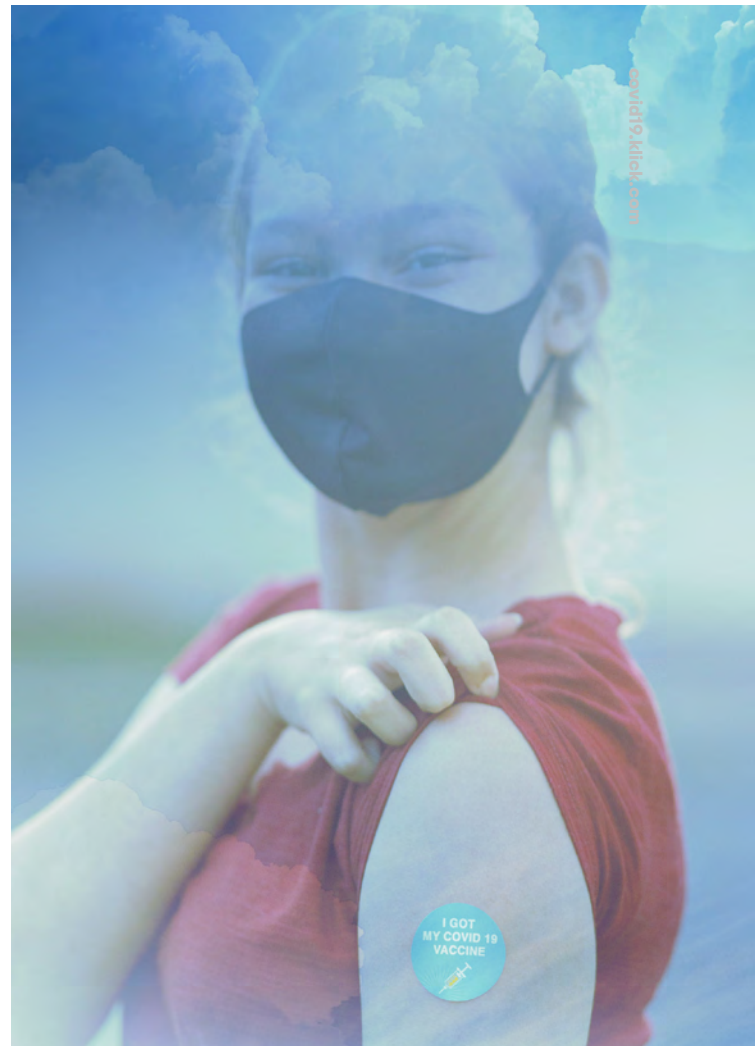
Orders for routine childhood vaccines among the Vaccines for Children Program, the federal program that provides free immunizations to low-income youth up to age 18 and covers nearly 50% of all U.S. children,

However, the pandemic poses new challenges to parents who may question the necessity of office visits to protect their children against vaccine-preventable diseases amid the very present threat of the pandemic.

The concept that the pandemic may have influenced consumers' health care decisions in a positive way—perhaps driving higher acceptance of routine vaccines post-COVID-19—remains unclear. Influenza is a helpful analog, since it returns every year and the CDC offers strong data via flu data surveillance systems.



took a [sharp decrease in spring 2020](#), after the national pandemic emergency was enacted. This decline was particularly steep among immunizations for young children under age two. Vaccination of young children has recovered somewhat via the efforts of VFC providers and pediatricians working to get their young patients caught up.



During the 2020–2021 flu season, the rate of vaccination among adults was 53%, compared with 45% in 2019,⁸ based on early season data. Yet, health equity, risk perception, and vaccine confidence played a role, with only 38% of Black adults getting a flu vaccine compared with 58% of white adults. This trend was also seen in children. In mid-January, 55% of U.S. children ages six months to 17 years had gotten a flu vaccine, compared with 56.5% during the same period in 2020. Disparities were pronounced here as well—coverage among white children was 14 points higher than among Black children, and five points higher than Hispanic children. Thankfully, the 2020–21 flu season had an historically low level of disease circulating. Thus far, there has been only one pediatric death from flu during the 2020–21 season, compared with more than 150 children who die from flu-related causes in a typical year.

It is critical to partner with pediatric health care providers to ensure children who missed well visits since March 2020 get caught back up on routine immunizations, particularly with most schools working to open in person in fall 2021. Data systems built to track vaccine acceptance and confidence during COVID-19 should be expanded to provide more robust monitoring systems for routine immunizations, particularly in communities of color.



Vaccine Confidence Best Practices

Decision making about vaccination is complex and affected by numerous factors. Some of the most influential factors are health care provider recommendation, risk perceptions about disease and need for/value of vaccines, vaccine schedules and timing of immunization, cultural and religious values, education, information-seeking habits, and access—including insurance coverage and ease of appointments.⁵ A parent who has questions about a vaccine for their child might approach the decision-making process in a far different way than an older adult considering a shingles vaccine.

Efforts to build vaccine confidence during the pandemic should call on best practices from established behavioral science around established vaccines. Many of the public education campaigns cited in this POV appear to do so, but the focus on increasing confidence and access among underserved communities makes evidence-based approaches critical to developing trust. Examples of best practices health marketers and public health professionals can use include:⁶

1. Co-creation of community-rooted interventions with the people the effort aims to reach. Partnering with trusted local organizations—be they health care, cultural, faith-based, education—is one of the most effective ways to ensure a vaccine campaign is successful.
2. Use of social norming techniques that borrow from behavioral science that convey vaccination as the “normal” or “right” thing to do in peer groups and communities. Interventions that cultivate vaccination as a social norm in a science-based public education initiative, particularly in digital formats, can provide accurate health messaging and counteract misinformation, or a perceived “need” to question vaccines.
3. Strong recommendation from healthcare providers, who can receive training to take an “assumptive” approach. In this, providers assume parents will vaccinate—easing appointment scheduling and access, and fostering vaccine champions among staff, who can act as sources of trusted information for parents and their communities.



A Stronger Future

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a terrible toll on individuals and families, exposing and exacerbating social and health inequalities. Yet, the pandemic also reveals tremendous resilience, scientific innovation, and the power of communities to get through difficult periods together. Public health and the value of vaccines are in the public discourse as never before, and pairing these with health equity is a powerful recipe for a stronger, better prepared and more equitable health system.

References:

The list below includes resources used to develop this POV and current public education campaigns on vaccine confidence.

1. Ad Council/COVID Collaborative — getanswers.org
2. HHS - Federal Campaign "We Can Do This" — <https://wecandothis.hhs.gov/>
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4. "Walgreens Boots Vaccine Confidence with 'This is Our Shot' Campaign" Alison Weisbrott, Campaign Live. April 2, 2021
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7. "What's in the American Rescue Plan for COVID-19 Vaccine and Other Public Health Efforts?" Jennifer Kates, Kaiser Health News. March 16, 2021
8. [Weekly Flu National Vaccination Dashboard](#), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Accessed April 7, 2021. Gallup, One in Three Americans Would Not Get COVID-19 Vaccine

We hope you've found this piece from our Life (Sciences) After COVID-19 series valuable and engaging. For more content like this, download our other published perspectives at **covid19.klick.com** and sign-up to receive future insights as soon as they become available.



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A strategic communications professional with more than 15 years' experience at the intersection of public health, public affairs, and policy.

Brandi Hight Bank is part of Klick's expanding Public Health & Policy practice. Brandi specializes in public health policy communications, specifically planning and executing national public education campaigns and novel approaches that spark behavior change.

Prior to joining Klick, Brandi held a number of public affairs roles at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) in the National Vaccine Program Office, which leads and coordinates federal vaccine policy.



While change can create challenges, it also opens the door to new opportunities. Join us as we explore the many imaginable paths to post-pandemic growth. We welcome you to start a dialogue with the author of this piece:

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