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Brief Report

Perspectives of Foster Care Alumni on COVID-19 Vaccination:

Key Findings and a Call to Action

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Introduction

The United States recently surpassed 32 million cases and 570 thousand deaths due to COVID-19.¹ Vaccination of the general population is critical to ending the pandemic, and several highly effective vaccines have now received emergency FDA approval. Young adults are a key group to target for vaccination, as they may be asymptomatic carriers of COVID-19 and unknowingly spread the virus to others.^{2,3} However, recent research suggests that young adults have concerns about COVID-19 vaccination,⁴ particularly if they belong to racial and ethnic minority groups or other marginalized populations.^{4,5}

Young people with foster care backgrounds are predominantly Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC),⁶ and their hesitancy toward COVID-19 vaccination may be exacerbated by public systems mistrust and ineffective messaging channels.⁷ To better understand vaccination attitudes among this population, we conducted focus groups and individual interviews with 23 young people ages 18 to 26 who had recently aged out of foster care. All young people in our sample were parents of young children; thus, their attitudes towards COVID-19 vaccination have relevance for their own as well as their children's likelihood of getting vaccinated. As part of this project, participants described their attitudes towards COVID-19 vaccination and their reasoning for either accepting or declining a vaccine. Interview audio files were transcribed verbatim and rigorously analyzed using a structured approach to thematic analysis.⁸

Key Findings

Attitudes towards and plans for COVID-19 vaccination varied from complete opposition ($n=15$, 65%), to ambivalence ($n=5$, 22%), to planning on vaccination ($n=3$, 13%).

Key concerns about COVID-19 vaccination included the belief that vaccines were developed and approved too quickly, and more data were needed about their short-term and long-term effects. Some youth also expressed concerns that the currently available vaccines were developed under an untrustworthy presidential administration in 2020, leading to considerable doubts about their safety and efficacy. Still others noted that even if they decided to get vaccinated, problems with vaccine access and availability may hinder their ability to do so.

Many participants were open to changing their mind about COVID-19 vaccination by having additional information about the currently available vaccines and their expected consequences.

Young people expressed deep concerns regarding misinformation, and shared many examples of misinformation that they were recently exposed to. Nonetheless, seeing trusted individuals such as colleagues and friends being vaccinated without adverse effects positively influenced some participants' likelihood to consider vaccination in the future.

Policy and Practice Implications

Several policy and practice recommendations are offered based on the results of this work:

- **Provide opportunities to discuss vaccination-related concerns using trusted sources:** Young adults need opportunities to discuss vaccination concerns openly and without judgment, and should receive vaccine-related information from sources that they consider trustworthy. This is particularly important for youth in foster care and recent foster care alumni, who may exhibit a high degree of mistrust in public systems. Addressing these youths' concerns about the efficacy of the COVID-19 vaccines and their potential risks and benefits will involve science communication via non-traditional channels, including social media and informal discussions with peers, featuring voices with racial, gender, and age diversity.
- **Facilitate convenient access to vaccination and address potential barriers:** Youth in foster care, recent foster care alumni, and other marginalized young adults should be given a convenient access to COVID-19 vaccination. This should include walk-in appointments that do not require pre-registration, the ability to bring children to the appointment, or the availability of childcare onsite, and access to vaccination sites that do not require significant travel (e.g., mobile vaccination sites). Employers should also play a role in facilitating vaccination access for these youth, such as allowing paid time off from work to get vaccinated.
- **Address vaccine misinformation directly, but without stigmatization:** Youth in foster care, recent foster care alumni, and other marginalized young adults, may be exposed to significant misinformation about COVID-19 vaccines. Addressing such misinformation is essential, but this should be done in a sensitive and non-stigmatizing manner, and by using sources that the youth trust. Prior research suggests that emphasizing the vaccines' high efficacy against hospitalization and death, and explaining that the new vaccination techniques have been in the works for many years, may constitute effective messaging for individuals who are uncertain about vaccination.⁴ For youth in foster care and recent foster care alumni, it is important to identify trusted individuals (many of whom may not be affiliated with the child welfare system) who can deliver such messaging successfully.

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