

Why Vaccine Confidence Matters to National Security

REPORT OF THE CSIS-LSHTM HIGH-LEVEL PANEL ON VACCINE CONFIDENCE AND MISINFORMATION: A SUMMARY

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As the second year of the Covid-19 pandemic unfolds, the United States has entered a new phase of heightened hope in the race to control the outbreak and get ahead of evolving variants. The U.S. government and health sector share an imperative to move quickly to immunize at scale and to address disparities in vaccine access at home and abroad. What is at stake is fundamentally a matter of national security: achieving herd immunity that truly and rapidly restabilizes public health, economic vitality, and society at large.

But public trust and confidence in vaccines, science, and public health authorities are both fragile and absolutely pivotal. A weary and often skeptical public searches for answers in a confusing information environment, beset by misinformation, falsehoods, and conspiracies. Historical legacies and partisan divisions in the United States shape attitudes in profound ways. In the race to ensure a high level of vaccination coverage and mitigate the Covid-19 pandemic, finding new ways to address the challenge of vaccine hesitancy has never been more important.

With the successful development and distribution of new vaccines, there is hope in the United States that the acute phase of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic may soon come to a close. As of May 3, 2021, more than **104 million people** in the United States have been fully vaccinated, and more than 147 million have had their first doses of Covid-19 vaccine. In another positive development, social media platforms have made public commitments to remove,

inform, and reduce misleading content and to bring these efforts to scale. At the same time, the U.S. government and its allies have become more aggressive in tracking and countering Russian and Chinese online disinformation campaigns aiming to undermine confidence in Western vaccines.

Nevertheless, public confidence and trust—in vaccines, authorities, and science—continue to fall significantly short of what is required to exit the pandemic crisis.

To move the United States forward in vaccine confidence and support its external partners, the CSIS-LSHTM High-Level Panel on Vaccine Confidence and Misinformation recommends bolstering efforts in five critical areas:



1 | Innovations in reaching diverse and underserved populations with vaccines delivered in the context of health and social services.

The Biden administration has called for the public sector at the national, state, and local levels to take the lead in strategic engagement of the populations that experience the **greatest disparities** in the face of Covid-19 and that harbor the greatest skepticism about vaccines. These should be delivered along with other health and social services that address the negative economic impacts that have left millions unemployed and unable to afford housing, food, and other necessities. Enlisting **trusted community leaders** will be essential in advancing such efforts.



2 | Pledges and actions by mainstream and digital media platforms to stop the spread of misinformation and to collaborate with health providers and the scientific community to increase the availability of accurate content.

The high-level panel recommends that the leadership of U.S. mainstream media outlets, in alliance with digital media platforms, build upon the recent advances in content moderation and lay down common principles of transparency and accountability, establish shared standards and definitions, and spotlight best practices and lessons learned.

Social media platforms can effectively mitigate the presence of harmful content and alter algorithms to prevent the automatic spread and reinforcement of misinformation and disinformation (e.g., “filter bubbles”) as well as develop and optimize other automatic processes to amplify and disseminate accurate information.



3 | Increased engagement by key social and economic sectors to empower people to make informed choices about Covid-19 vaccines.

The Biden administration has recently forged new partnerships with leadership of critical social and economic sectors, such as transportation, education, and agriculture, urging them to step forward and speak. Those who have the most to gain by a successful Covid-19 vaccine introduction—and the most to lose if that effort fails—have committed to engage their respective communities in a sustained dialogue about vaccines’ merits and risks.

Iconic cultural figures with substantial media presence and bipartisan reach can also be highly impactful in supporting dialogue and disseminating messages to a broad audience. Far more conversation is warranted among educational institutions, businesses, healthcare providers, the agricultural sector, and the security, law enforcement, and military communities.



4 | Greater executive branch coordination and action beyond the emergency.

The White House has established a powerful Covid-19 Response Team, recently re-established a National Security Council (NSC) directorate for global health security and biodefense, and launched an [Equity Task Force](#). It has elevated the head of the White House Office of Science and Technology to cabinet rank.

These entities, along with the Departments of Defense, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, and State and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, in collaboration with the Domestic Policy Council, can contribute to a coordinated U.S. policy formulation that prioritizes addressing misinformation and determines the most effective strategies for bolstering vaccine confidence.



5 | Increased U.S. support for global immunization partners.

As the Department of State and White House, joined by other departments and agencies, develop a global health security strategy and define U.S. diplomatic priorities, they should

elevate efforts to strengthen public confidence in vaccines, public health, and science globally.

Washington should use its influence to shape a coordinated international approach to the shared concerns of vaccine confidence and misinformation. The case that vaccine confidence and misinformation are matters of global security should be systematically incorporated into high-level dialogues at the UN Security Council, the G7 and G20, the Quad (United States, India, Japan, and Australia), and the renewed U.S.-European transatlantic relationship.

The recent United States [commitment](#) of \$4 billion to Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, to support the COVAX Facility’s effort to deliver 2 billion doses to 20 percent or more of the populations of 92 lower- and lower-middle-income countries over the next two years can be leveraged to encourage other donors to reinforce their support for the initiative.

In the space of a year, the Covid-19 outbreak has sharpened the argument that pandemic preparedness and response, including the distribution of vaccines, are matters of U.S. national security. Until the pandemic is effectively controlled, neither the economy nor society can reopen safely and effectively.

Several effective vaccines are now publicly available. But with variants of Covid-19 proliferating, there is still more to be done. Strengthening vaccine confidence, shaping the information environment, and bringing trusted, reliable science to skeptical and anxious publics can protect health security and national security now and in the future.

ABOUT THE CSIS-LSHTM HIGH-LEVEL PANEL ON VACCINE CONFIDENCE AND MISINFORMATION

In July 2020, the Center for Strategic and International Studies’ (CSIS) Global Health Policy Center and the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine’s (LSHTM) Vaccine Confidence Project™ convened a high-level [panel](#) of experts to assess the implications of misinformation and vaccine confidence for U.S. national security. The panel is co-chaired by J. Stephen Morrison, senior vice president and director of the CSIS Global Health Policy Center, and Heidi J. Larson, professor of anthropology, risk, and decision science and director of the Vaccine Confidence Project™ at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine. The panel’s secretariat is based at the CSIS Global Health Policy Center and is headed by Katherine E. Bliss, project director and senior fellow. For the complete recommendations, read our final report: [Why Vaccine Confidence Matters to National Security](#).