

As COVID-19 vaccine eligibility opens up, fears persist that residents of color will continue to be left behind

Hurdles remain to getting the vaccine, and a Dallas Morning News analysis found that Latinos and Blacks are still trailing behind whites in getting inoculated.



Leslie Armijo helps Enrique Facundo at Santa Teresita Catholic Church, to fill out a form to proceed with his registration to request an appointment to get a COVID-19 vaccine in Dallas on Tuesday, March 9, 2021. (Lola Gomez)

By [Everton Bailey Jr.](#), [Dianne Solis](#) and [Holly K. Hacker](#) 11:59 AM on Mar 27, 2021

Ines Garcia Sr. doesn't own a computer. And even if he did, he says he wouldn't know how to register online for a COVID-19 vaccine.

So his stepdaughter and daughter-in-law each registered him for the shot in January with Dallas County.

Garcia said after he was invited to schedule a vaccine appointment, his son drove him the next day to get his first dose of the Moderna vaccine at The Potter's House church in southern Dallas. They arrived around 7:30 a.m. on March 4, and Garcia got the shot close to three hours later.

Sitting in his son's pickup in the church's parking lot, Garcia waited for possible side effects. He said he felt a wave of relief — and anxiety. He kept thinking of people who'd gotten their shots and told him they felt fevers coming on afterward.



"Most of them got it and they're doing all right," said Garcia, 67, of Mesquite. "So I'm hoping I do all right too."

Three months into vaccinations, Texas, like many states nationwide, has lagged in inoculating residents of color.

Starting Monday, all adult Texans over 16 will be eligible to receive the COVID-19 vaccines — making the Lone Star State the largest in the country to [expand eligibility to everyone](#). Currently, only the Pfizer vaccine is authorized for 16 and up. The Moderna and Johnson & Johnson vaccines are approved for those 18 and up.

Leslie Armijo helps Jose Cardenas fill out a form at Santa Teresita Catholic Church to proceed with his registration to request an appointment to get a COVID-19 vaccine in Dallas on Tuesday, March 9, 2021. (Lola Gomez)

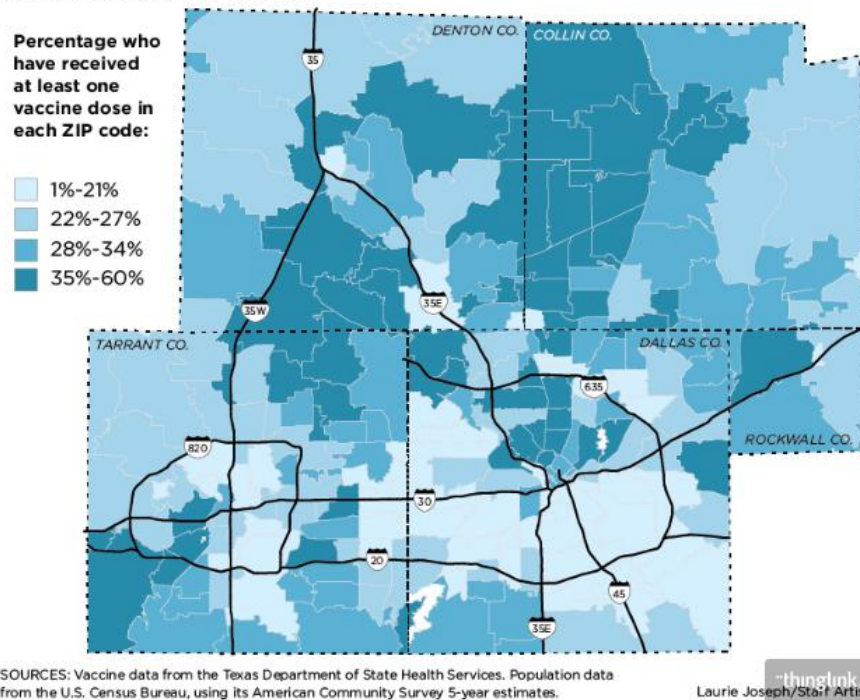
But without a statewide plan to focus on vulnerable populations outside of age or serious health conditions, many fear that vaccination gaps will widen. And the consequences could be deadly as people of color have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19.

Racial and economic disparities have marked all aspects of the pandemic, from the early testing site [locations](#) to the diverging [infection](#) and [death rates](#).

And gaps persist for Latinos and Blacks, who trail behind their white counterparts in getting the vaccine, according to a *Dallas Morning News* analysis of state vaccine data.

Who's getting a shot?

Vaccination rates across North Texas were calculated by dividing the number of residents who've received at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine as of March 22 by the total number of residents ages 16 and older in each ZIP code.



The process for getting a vaccine still heavily favors those who have a car and internet access — making community outreach crucial in underserved areas, said Rogelio Sáenz, a demographer at the University of Texas at San Antonio who has studied the pandemic's effects on communities of color.



Beyond technology and transportation barriers, other hurdles remain among Texans of color. Concerns about the vaccines persist, including apprehension over side effects since they have only been approved for federal emergency use.

Garcia is one of nearly 6.9 million Texans — or roughly 24% of the state's population of 29 million — who have received at least the first dose of the vaccine, according to state data as of Saturday. Around the same percentage of Dallas County's 2.6 million residents have also gotten at least the first of the two-dose shots.

With 2.4 million confirmed COVID-19 cases in the state, 47,000 Texans have died as of Saturday, according to state data. Nearly 3,500 have been in Dallas County alone.

Rogelio Sáenz is a demographer at the University of Texas at San Antonio. (Mark McClendon / UT San Antonio)

At 46%, Latinos make up the largest ethnic group of Texans killed by the virus despite accounting for nearly 40% of the state's population. As of Thursday, only 23% of vaccines statewide have gone to those residents.

While in the driver's seat next to his father earlier this month, Ines Garcia Jr. said he was still apprehensive about the vaccine. The 48-year-old caught COVID-19 last fall and said he nearly went to the hospital because of it after experiencing symptoms for about a week. Effects linger, he said, including routine aches.

"I don't want to get that sickness again," he said. "Getting a shot, nothing might happen to me. But ..."

"He thinks he might end up getting it again," his father said, finishing his son's sentence.



Ines Garcia Sr., left, and son, Ines Garcia Jr., sit in their truck after the father received his first COVID-19 vaccination at The Potter's House in Dallas on March 4, 2021. (Everton Bailey Jr./The Dallas Morning News / Everton Bailey Jr.)

Vaccine disparities

Dallas city and county officials have prioritized vaccines in hard-hit neighborhoods. The city moved its main vaccine site from downtown to The Potter's House in southwest Dallas' Mountain Creek neighborhood. And UT Southwestern, another hub provider, offers vaccines at Southwest Center Mall in Red Bird. Dallas County's site is at Fair Park in South Dallas.

All three of those areas are lower-income and majority Black or Latino. And they're in ZIP codes with some of North Texas' lowest vaccination rates, *The News'* analysis found.

The News analyzed the most recent vaccination data from the Texas Department of State Health Services. It shows by ZIP code the number of residents who have received at least one COVID-19 vaccine dose as of March 22.

Dallas ZIP code 75225 — which includes parts of Preston Hollow and University Park — has the region's highest vaccination rate, *The News* found, with an estimated 60% of residents having received at least one dose. It's predominantly white and the median income is \$161,296.

About a half-hour drive south in Dallas' Red Bird community, in 75237, only 11% of residents there have received shots. The area's population is 80% Black and the median household income is \$28,000 a year.

"This is a tremendous problem," said Dr. Erin Carlson, an associate clinical professor at the University of Texas at Arlington's College of Nursing and Health Innovation. "Ultimately, public health is about everyone."

"If any one group or neighborhood or demographic of our community is unvaccinated, then we don't have herd immunity."

Overcoming uncertainty

Leslie Armijo, executive director of a local health group called [Don't Wait to Vaccinate](#), said she's been going to churches, grocery store parking lots and other places helping people to sign up for the vaccine. Recently, she and colleagues have targeted outreach in ZIP codes like 75212 where infections have been higher.

She recently volunteered to register people and to thread that mission with other nonprofits, like Hunger Busters, on a chilly morning. The Hunger Busters crew provided food to people who lined up to get vaccine registration information.

“Some people say they are scared and want to wait,” Armijo said. “They are a little wary of the side effects.”

But they make up only a small percentage of those Armijo has talked to.



Leslie Armijo hands out forms to people in line at Santa Teresita Catholic Church in Dallas on Tuesday, March 9, 2021, as they wait to get food aid from Hunger Busters. Armijo helps people to navigate the COVID-19 vaccine process about five times a week as a volunteer. (Lola Gomez/The Dallas Morning News) (Lola Gomez)

Armijo would like to see vaccinations extend into the evenings for those who work night shifts. Registrations could take place at big workplaces with stable internet, she said.

Enrique Facundo, 51, pulled his white Ford truck into the line. He'd already received his first shot because he has diabetes and was on a priority list. But he knew others who were resisting, he said, shaking his masked head.

“It’s good to have this focus here on the vaccines,” Facundo said.

Tabitha Wheeler, a community activist who lives in South Dallas, said most people she knows are delaying getting the vaccine or are unsure altogether if they’ll get inoculated.

Many say they don’t know enough about the vaccine options to know if they’re safe or feel there hasn’t been enough time to study the long-term effects.

Some possible side effects of the vaccines can range from mild ones like arm soreness, headaches or muscle pain to more severe issues like difficulty breathing, swelling or hives.



Leslie Armijo reaches out to people in line at Santa Teresita Catholic Church in Dallas on Tuesday, March 9, 2021, as they wait to get food aid from Hunger Busters. Armijo helps people to navigate the COVID-19 vaccine process about five times a week as a volunteer. (Lola Gomez/The Dallas Morning News) (Lola Gomez)

Wheeler, who is Black, said some people are still on the fence even after they have had relatives die.

Wheeler recently turned down an offer to get a first dose from Parkland. After hearing about new strains of the virus, she said, she needs more time to gauge their effectiveness, particularly for Black women, to be more comfortable with getting inoculated.

She mentioned community leader [Bishop Omar Jahwar](#), who died March 11 after COVID-19-related complications. She noted they're around the same age and that the death of the 47-year-old hit close to home.

"You're kind of rolling the dice a little bit either way," said Wheeler, 44. "I don't want to get COVID and die, but I'm scared about the vaccine. A lot of us are."

Another challenge in the Catholic community has been the debate over research or production of vaccines involving fetal cell lines.

"There has been [some trepidation about the Johnson & Johnson vaccine](#)," said the Rev. Russ Mower, the parish priest at St. Elizabeth of Hungary Catholic Church in Oak Cliff. But he tells parishioners: "If that is a concern and you have a choice, then certainly go with one of the other vaccines."

The Vatican [itself stepped in](#) to say it was "morally acceptable" to receive a COVID-19 vaccine.

If a Catholic's only choice is the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, they should take that jab in the arm, the priest said.

"Do that with a clear conscience that what you are doing is for the benefit of your brothers and sisters in your neighborhood."

Jenny Zacarias, a Peruvian immigrant, said more must be done to reach Latino and Black communities. She was vaccinated recently after the age limits were lowered to 50.

"Bring the vaccines to the people," said Zacarias, 51.

That will improve efficiency and raise trust, said Zacarias, who volunteers with Dallas Area Interfaith at Holy Trinity Catholic Church. The group works with many undocumented immigrants, she said.

“They don’t trust the government. That is another concern. Who do they trust? They trust the church.”

Improving access

Dallas City Council member Jaime Resendez said he was part of an effort with the county and a local nonprofit to bus eligible residents who live in ZIP codes 75217 or 75227, which include Pleasant Grove and Buckner Terrace, to Fair Park for their appointments on March 10 and March 16. About 200 people were taken to the site, he said.



“It’s been very helpful to folks, but there’s still more work to be done,” said Resendez, who represents southeast Dallas and Pleasant Grove.

Dallas City Council member Casey Thomas, who represents southwest Dallas, including Red Bird, said he believes more people will be left behind in the weeks following widespread eligibility because of lack of transportation and the online registration process.

Getting more vaccines would go far in helping fill the demand and close disparity gaps, said Thomas, who chairs the city’s COVID-19 recovery

Dallas City Council member Casey Thomas II represents southwest Dallas, including Redbird, where vaccination rates are low. (Lynda M. Gonzalez / Staff Photographer)

and assistance committee. But he said it’s unclear what the plan is to prevent gaps from widening as more people become eligible for shots.

“You would have thought,” Thomas said, “that after having fought this fight for equitable testing for communities of color, and equitable access to PPE for communities of color, that we would be prepared with a written, detailed plan on vaccine distribution for everyone.”

He said he hasn’t seen one.