



# Attitudes and Perceptions toward COVID-19 Vaccination in El Salvador

## A Cross-Sectional Facility-Level Survey

### Background

Since December 2021, COVID-19 vaccination coverage in El Salvador has stalled, with the Ministry of Health reporting approximately 70 percent of the population as fully vaccinated with at least two doses. The vaccination rate for those receiving a third dose has held steady at 28 percent coverage as of July 2022. To support the government of El Salvador to address stagnation, the Health Policy Plus (HP+) project, funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development, conducted a survey to understand barriers to vaccine uptake and access to COVID-19 information among vaccinated and unvaccinated populations.

### Methodology

The HP+ survey was designed based on surveys from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Ipsos (CDC, 2021; Ipsos, 2020). It comprised 26 questions:

- Seven on socioeconomic parameters
- Five on COVID-19 vaccination history and number of doses received
- Eight on perceptions and attitudes toward COVID-19 and vaccination
- Three on trust in health agencies and sources of information

- Three on perceptions of boosters and biosafety measures

The survey targeted respondents 18 years of age and over who attended clinics or health units during the study. The survey was administered in 73 health units within 30 municipalities, prioritized for their lower vaccination coverage rates and large populations, and was representative of the country's 14 departments. It was implemented by new physicians during their social service year between July 22 and August 12, 2022, using RotatorSurvey software installed on electronic tablets for data collection. The survey was anonymous (no personally identifiable information was included) and voluntary (a nonresponse option was included for each question). HP+ performed data analysis using Microsoft Excel and Stata 15.1. The total sample was 2,174 surveys, of which 2,130 were considered for analysis after data cleaning. The nonresponse rate was not registered.

### Survey Demographics

Of the total respondents surveyed, 68 percent were female and 40 percent were 30–49 years of age. About one-third of respondents were from the departments of San Salvador (18 percent) and Santa Ana (13 percent). Most respondents (55 percent) had completed lower levels of education

(secondary or elementary) or had no studies and reported being employed (53 percent); only 19 percent reported having university or higher levels of education.

## Key Results

Of the 2,130 respondents surveyed, 31 percent reported having COVID-19 currently or in the past. This percentage is greater than the official COVID-19 cases reported nationally since 2020 (3.15 percent) by the government of El Salvador. About 88 percent of participants reported receiving at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine: one dose (5 percent), two doses (34 percent), and three or four doses (61 percent). Furthermore, 97 percent of unvaccinated recipients reported never having COVID-19 in the past or not

being aware of it, while only 67 percent of vaccinated said the same (see Table 1). Only 42 percent of respondents reported receiving their last COVID-19 vaccine dose since January 2022 (see Figure 1).

### Perceptions of COVID-19 vaccination.

COVID-19 has become a minor concern for most respondents (60 percent). While 66 percent of unvaccinated respondents perceived the vaccine as unsafe or slightly safe, only 44 percent reported fear of secondary effects and/or vaccine safety as their main reason for rejecting the vaccine. Other reasons included personal beliefs (20 percent) and religion (6 percent).

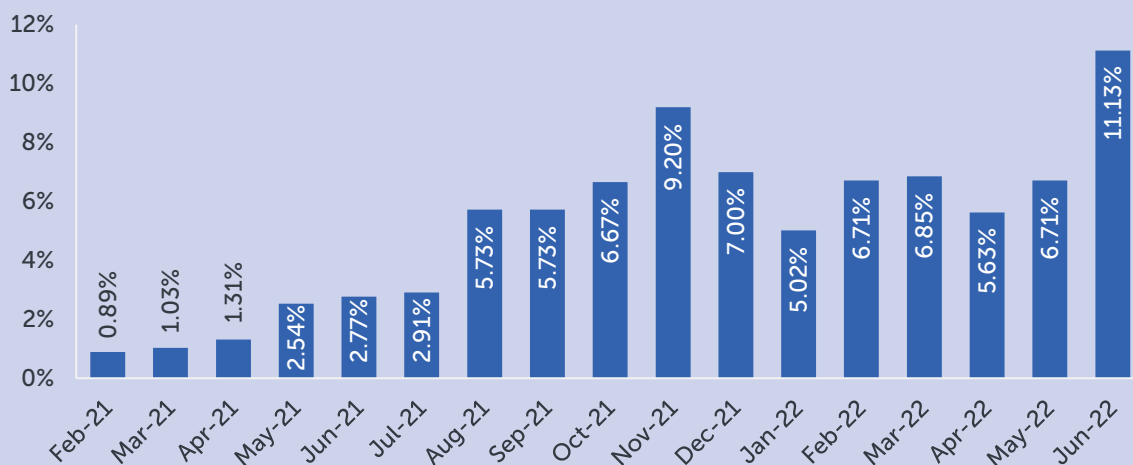
**Barriers to vaccination.** The most common obstacles to vaccination uptake among unvaccinated respondents were lack of

**Table 1. Bivariate Analysis, Vaccination, and COVID-19 History**

Had COVID-19	Vaccinated	Unvaccinated	Total
Yes	632 (30%)	30 (1%)	<b>662 (31%)</b>
No/don't know	1,256 (59%)	208 (10%)	<b>1,464 (69%)</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,888 (89%)</b>	<b>238 (11%)</b>	<b>2,126 (100%)</b>

Notes: Vaccinated refers to those who received at least one dose of any vaccine; Chi2 = 42.9308; p < 0.05; N = 2,126

**Figure 1. Timing of Last Dose Received**



time, transportation, or long wait times (see Table 2).

**Confidence in health organizations and information sources.**

Most respondents reported that the Ministry of Health and the Salvadoran Social Security Institute, healthcare personnel, and social media were the three most reliable information sources for COVID-19 vaccination, regardless of participants’ vaccination status. However, despite it being listed as the third most reliable, about 40 percent of respondents reported having trouble assessing the veracity of information coming from social media. Regardless of respondents’ education level, this percentage was only slightly higher than reported confidence in news/television programs, WhatsApp/family and friends, and religious meetings (approximately 35 percent on average).

Only 30 percent of respondents reported full confidence in health institutions (e.g., Ministry of Health and the Salvadoran Social Security Institute) regarding their recommendations on COVID-19 vaccination. However, trust in health institutions varied among vaccinated and unvaccinated respondents. Using a scale from 1 to 10, where 10 translates to full confidence, the mean among unvaccinated respondents was 6.8 while the mean among vaccinated respondents was 8.1.

**Perception toward boosters.** Looking to the future, 74 percent of those interviewed considered it very likely or likely that COVID-19 boosters will be needed annually. Yet only 62 percent of vaccinated individuals think it is very likely or likely that they would get a booster every year, and only 41 percent every six months. Overall, there is a willingness to receive an additional dose of the vaccine.

**Table 2. Reported Barriers to COVID-19 Vaccination**

Barrier to Vaccination	Percentage of Respondents
Lack of time/work	18%
Lack of transportation or means to pay	16%
Long wait times	12%
Challenges making an appointment	11%
Access/distance to vaccination centers	9%
Unsure/undecided	9%
Other (fear of the vaccine, fear of secondary effects/allergic reaction, and contraindication for pregnancy)	7%
Having caregiver responsibilities	6%
Not knowing where to get vaccinated	4%
Not being able to attend alone (e.g., physical limitation)	4%
Inconvenient hours of operation of vaccination centers	2%
Ineligibility for medical reasons	1%

Respondents 18–20 years of age and 70 years of age and over expressed some inclination to get boosters if they were administered annually rather than every six months. Most respondents (56 percent) believe that once cases decrease and pre-COVID-19 life resumes, there won't be any reasons for getting additional vaccine doses.

### Perception of biosafety measures.

There was a willingness among most respondents to continue social distancing measures (65 percent) and the use of masks (75 percent). Most respondents considered it very likely or likely that they would continue with the use of face masks in different spaces, primarily public transportation (84 percent), the workplace (81 percent), and indoor stores (75 percent).

**Limitations.** Survey results are biased toward women (representing 68 percent of respondents) who attend healthcare units in the two largest municipalities in El Salvador: San Salvador and Santa Ana. Since the survey was implemented in a healthcare setting, results are also biased toward individuals with healthcare-seeking behaviors. Most participants reported receiving at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine (88 percent). The nonresponse rate was not reported in the data collection tool.

## Key Messages for the Ministry of Health

- A substantial percentage of vaccinated (88 percent) and unvaccinated (48 percent) respondents reported that it was or would be very easy or easy to get vaccinated.
- About one-third (31 percent) of respondents reported having COVID-19 during the pandemic, of which 64 percent reported receiving a kit from the Ministry of Health to help manage COVID-19 symptoms at home; only eight respondents (1.2 percent) reported being denied care.
- There are high levels of acceptance of and trust in the Ministry of Health and the Salvadoran Social Security Institute, with an overall score of 8 out of 10, where 10 represents full confidence.
- Unvaccinated respondents reported a preference to receive the COVID-19 vaccine in a health facility (44 percent), their home (31 percent), or workplace (6 percent).
- Over half of vaccinated respondents (58 percent) reported not being concerned about contracting COVID-19. This percentage increased to 73 percent for the unvaccinated.
- Among unvaccinated respondents, 43 percent reported lack of time, transportation, or access as the main barrier to receiving the COVID-19 vaccine. Information gaps regarding the current vaccination strategy (e.g., not being aware of the location of vaccine centers or that appointments were no longer required was reported by 15 percent of unvaccinated respondents). Only 14 percent reported reasons associated with the vaccination centers (waiting times or operation hours).
- There is a willingness among most participants (65 percent) to continue social distancing measures and the use of masks (75 percent). Their disposition depends largely on space; people are more likely to use masks on public transportation, at their workplace, and in indoor stores than when walking outdoors or visiting friends.
- Respondents, especially those 20–59 years of age, were open to receiving an additional dose of the COVID-19 vaccine if the authorities suggested it. There was

greater acceptance among respondents of annual rather than biannual boosters, regardless of age.

## Recommendations

Based on the results of the survey, HP+ recommends that the Ministry of Health:

1. Launch a campaign for COVID-19 boosters using mixed media sources (e.g., television, radio, and social media). This campaign should target the population below 20 years of age and over 60, since these age groups expressed greater hesitancy regarding boosters.
2. Create targeted messages to inform the public that vaccines are available from Monday to Sunday without a scheduled appointment.
3. Inform the population about the location and operating hours of vaccination centers through a clear and public schedule, including disseminating the schedule in the areas where the door-to-door vaccination campaigns will be carried out. This campaign should be conducted in alliance with Fondo Solidario para la Salud (FOSALUD).
4. Create infographics to distribute in healthcare settings explaining the risks and debunking myths and misinformation. Provide short talks in waiting areas and/or broadcast short videos if televisions are available in waiting areas.

5. Issue messages with the logos of the Ministry of Health and Salvadoran Social Security Institute to leverage the reported high level of trust in these institutions and engage healthcare personnel in developing communication strategies and delivering messages to patients.
6. Continue working with the private sector to consider providing vaccination services in the workplace.

## References

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