

# Perceptions and Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic in West Virginia

## West Virginia Social Survey Report

WVSS-21-01

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### Background

COVID-19 is a disease caused by SARS-CoV-2 that was discovered in Wuhan, China in December of 2019. COVID-19 predominantly affects the respiratory system and is highly contagious. As of May of 2021, over six million people worldwide have died of COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic drastically altered the lives of American's beginning in March of 2020. In addition to isolation and quarantine, the pandemic in the U.S. context also came with a host of social, political, and economic shifts. This report will discuss the perceptions and impacts of COVID-19 on West Virginians in comparison to the U.S.

### Highlights

- West Virginia adults are more likely to think that the COVID-19 pandemic is a hoax and less likely to agree that mask wearing is effective against COVID-19.
- Conservative and moderate respondents are more likely to think that the COVID-19 pandemic is a hoax compared to liberal respondents.
- West Virginia adults who have not been vaccinated are less likely than U.S. adults generally to report intending to get vaccinated.
- West Virginians are more likely to report being much worse off in 2021 compared to 2020.

This report evaluates some of the perceptions and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in the state context of West Virginia using West Virginia Social Survey Data gathered during 2020 and 2021.

Existing research has made it clear that the United States has faced various social and economic consequences as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This report will discuss West Virginians’ beliefs and experiences throughout the pandemic.

**Perceptions of the Pandemic**

Perceptions of the COVID-19 pandemic varied throughout the pandemic, globally, and within the United States.

For example, the Pew Research Center finds that, while most (43%) U.S. Adults report believing that COVID-19 came

about naturally, approximately three in ten U.S. adults report believing that COVID-19 has human origins or was created in a lab.

Table 1 compares findings from the West Virginia Social Survey to national survey data asking about individuals’ perceptions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our findings suggest that West Virginia adults are somewhat more likely to strongly agree that COVID-19 is a hoax (5.1%) than U.S. adults in general (3.1%). We also find that West Virginia adults are somewhat less likely to strongly agree that mask wearing is effective at reducing the transmission of COVID-19 (40.6%) when compared to U.S. adults in general (50.8%).

On the other hand, we do not find sizable differences between West Virginians and

U.S. adults more broadly in perceptions of COVID-19 as “God’s punishment,” perceptions that the seasonal flu is “just as dangerous as COVID-19,” or perceptions of the COVID-19 vaccines as safe.

**Politics and Perceptions**

Perceptions of and attitudes toward COVID-19 are also influenced by political ideology. For example, the Pew Research Center found that U.S. adults who identify as Republican are more likely than those identifying as Democrat to report seeing news about the pandemic that seemed made up, with 39% of Republicans stating that some of the information and news surrounding the pandemic seemed completely made up and 14% stating that a lot of the information seemed completely made up.

**Table 1. West Virginians’ Perceptions of COVID-19 Compared to U.S. Overall**

	Percentage Strongly Agreeing	
	U.S. Adults	West Virginia Adults
COVID-19 is a hoax.	3.1%	5.1%
COVID-19 is God’s punishment for immoral behavior.	2.6%	2.3%
Mask wearing reduces the transmission of COVID-19.	50.8%	40.6%
The seasonal flu is just as dangerous as COVID-19.	13.4%	12.1%
COVID-19 vaccines are safe.	34.8%	33.8%

*Note: WV Data from West Virginia Social Surveys; U.S. data from survey of 2,003 individuals in the NORC AmeriSpeak panel fielded from May 20th-June 2nd, 2021; The West Virginia statement was “COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective.” The U.S. adults statement was “COVID-19 vaccines are safe”*

**Table 2. Political Ideology and West Virginians' Perceptions of COVID-19**

<i>Political Ideology</i>	Percentage Strongly Agreeing		
	Liberal	Moderate	Conservative
COVID-19 is a hoax.	1.3%	5.2%	6.3%
COVID-19 is God's punishment for immoral behavior.	1.9%	2.8%	2.3%
Mask wearing reduces the transmission of COVID-19.	65.2%	48.9%	20.9%
The seasonal flu is just as dangerous as COVID-19.	9.1%	8.3%	17.7%
COVID-19 vaccines are safe.	53.8%	36.9%	20.9%

*Note: Data from 2021 West Virginia Social Survey*

We find similar politicization among West Virginians' perceptions of COVID-19, as seen in Table 2. Our findings suggest that both conservative (6.3%) and moderate (5.2%) respondents are more likely than liberal (1.3%) respondents to strongly agree that COVID-19 is a hoax.

We also find that liberals are far more likely than conservatives to strongly agree that mask wearing reduces the transmission of COVID-19, with 65.2% of liberal respondents strongly agreeing this is the case compared to only 20.9% of conservative respondents.

Conservative respondents (17.7%) are also more likely to strongly agree that the seasonal flu is just as dangerous as COVID-19 compared to both liberal (9.1%) and moderate (8.3%) respondents.

Finally, liberal respondents were more likely to strongly

agree that COVID-19 vaccines are safe, with 53.8% of liberal respondents agreeing this is the case compared to 20.9% of conservative respondents.

### **COVID-19 Vaccines**

As the COVID-19 pandemic has become highly politicized, vaccination against COVID-19 has also become highly politicized.

National and West Virginia State data is consistent in the number of U.S. and West Virginia adults reporting having gotten vaccinated, with 66.3% of both U.S. and West Virginia adults reporting vaccination against COVID-19, as seen in Table 3.

This rate of vaccination among both U.S. and West Virginia adults is consistent with Pew Research findings that approximately 60% of U.S. adults intended to get

vaccinated when the vaccine became available.

Of those West Virginia adults who did not report having been vaccinated, 6.5% reported an intention to get vaccinated and approximately 25.2% reported that they did not plan on receiving a COVID-19 vaccine.

It seems that West Virginia adults are more likely than U.S. adults to report that they do not intend on receiving a vaccine, with 21% reporting that this is the case in Pew Research's findings and 25.2% reporting that this is the case in our West Virginia Social Survey findings.

**Table 3. COVID-19 Vaccine Intentions in West Virginia Compared to U.S.**

	U.S. Adults	West Virginia Adults
Have you received a vaccine for COVID-19?		
Yes	66.3%	66.3%
No	33.7%	33.7%
Total	100%	100%
<b>AMONG UNVACCINATED...</b>		
How likely are you to receive a vaccine for COVID-19?		
Very likely	9.6%	--
Somewhat likely	13.0%	--
A little likely	20.5%	--
Not at all likely	56.9%	--
I plan to receive a vaccine for COVID-19.	--	20.5%
I do not plan to receive a vaccine for COVID-19.	--	79.5%
Total	100%	100%

*Note: WV Data from 2021 West Virginia Social Survey; U.S. data from survey of 2,003 individuals in the NORC AmeriSpeak panel fielded from May 20th-June 2nd, 2021*

**Impacts Beyond Health**

Many families, both nationally and local to West Virginia, experienced financial hardship throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

For example, Pew Research Center found that approximately three in ten lower-income adults had a spell of unemployment during the height of the pandemic.

Further, Pew Research found that approximately a third of lower-income adults said their family’s situation had worsened in the last year compared to about 18% of middle-income

and 11% of higher-income adults.

Our findings reflect similar trends in financial well-being in West Virginia throughout the pandemic, as seen in Table 4.

In 2020, in the early stages of the pandemic, only 4.6% of individuals reported being much worse off. In 2021, this percentage more than doubled with 10.6% of individuals reporting being much worse off.

Respondents were also more likely to report being somewhat worse off in 2021, with 18.9% reporting being somewhat

worse off compared to 14.6% in 2020.

Respondents were also less likely to report being either somewhat or much better off in 2021 compared to 2020, with 13.8% of respondents reporting being somewhat better off in 2021 compared to 18.3% in 2020 and 5% of respondents reporting being much better off in 2021 compared to 6.5% in 2020.

**Data Source**

**Table 4. West Virginia Financial Well-Being Before and After COVID-19 Pandemic**

Compared to 12 months ago, would you say that you and any family living with you are better off, the same, or worse off financially?		
	2020	2021
Much worse off	4.6%	10.6%
Somewhat worse off	14.6%	18.9%
About the same	56.0%	51.7%
Somewhat better off	18.3%	13.8%
Much better off	6.5%	5.0%
	100%	100%

*Note: Data from 2020 and 2021 West Virginia Social Surveys*

The WVSS is produced by the Survey Research Center at West Virginia University. The purpose of the WVSS is to gather information on the attitudes, concerns, and challenges facing WV residents.

The WVSS is a mail survey utilizing an address-based sample of nearly 5,000 households across the state. The 2021 WVSS added the option of completing the survey online.

The 2020 WVSS received nearly 1,900 responses for a response rate of 38.1% (American Association of Public Opinion Research Definition #3).

The 2021 WVSS received 1,317 responses for a response rate of 26.7% (American Association of Public Opinion Research

Definition #3). Data are weighted to be representative of the West Virginia adult population.

The U.S. national data collection was supported by a grant from the *Science and Religion: Identity and Belief Formation* grant initiative spearheaded by the Religion and Public Life Program at Rice University and the University of California-San Diego and provided by the Templeton Religion Trust via The Issachar Fund.

The data was fielded using the AmeriSpeak Panel, a probability panel of over 40,000 households created and managed by NORC at the University of Chicago. The survey was fielded from May 17<sup>th</sup> through June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021. A

total of 8,238 panelists representing a random selection of adults age 18 or older were invited to complete the survey with a target final sample size of 2,000. In the end, 2,003 panelists completed the survey for a completion rate of 24.3%.

**Suggested Citation**

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