

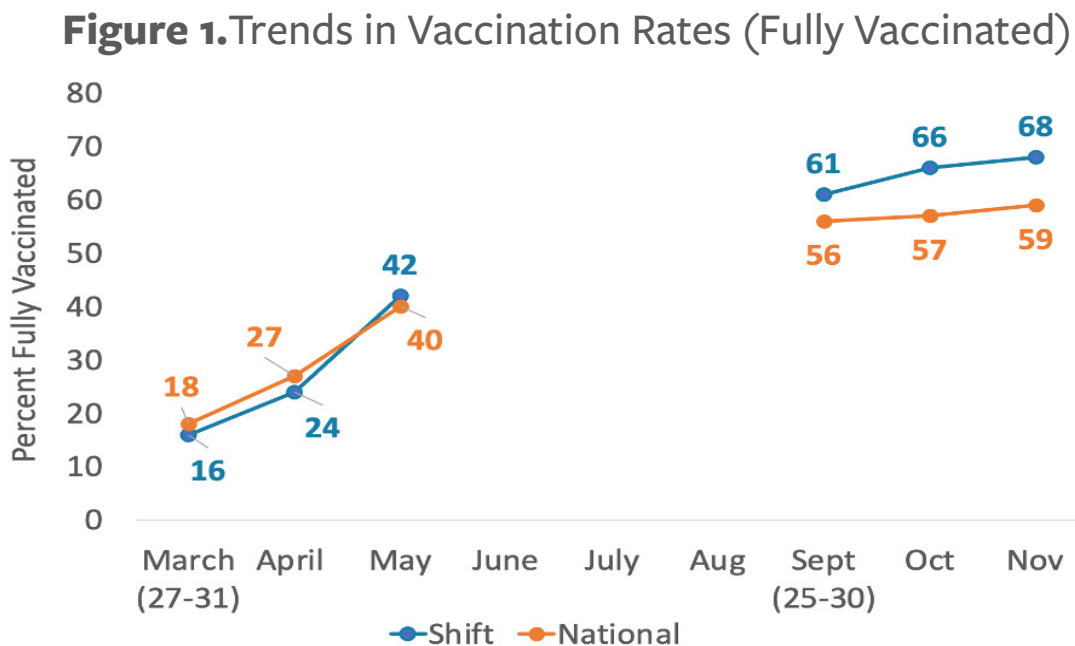
# Employee Vaccination Rates in the Retail Sector: Successes and Resistance

Nearing the end of 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic remains a serious threat to population health. Most recently, the discovery of the virulent Omicron variant renewed concerns about the continued health risks of this global pandemic. Two important features that shape the risk of COVID-19 at both the personal and population level include exposure to this airborne pathogen and vaccination status.

In this brief, we focus on vaccination rates among workers in retail and food service settings, which by their nature involve exposure to risk because they are indoors and often dense and high traffic. We share recent data collected between September to November of 2021 on the vaccination rates of workers in the service sector, how they vary across employers and by whether employers provided supports for vaccination. For workers who remain unvaccinated, we share their reasons why. To our knowledge, this is the first research to show rates of vaccination by company for large firms in the retail, food service, grocery, pharmacy, and other retail sectors.

## Trends in Vaccination Rates

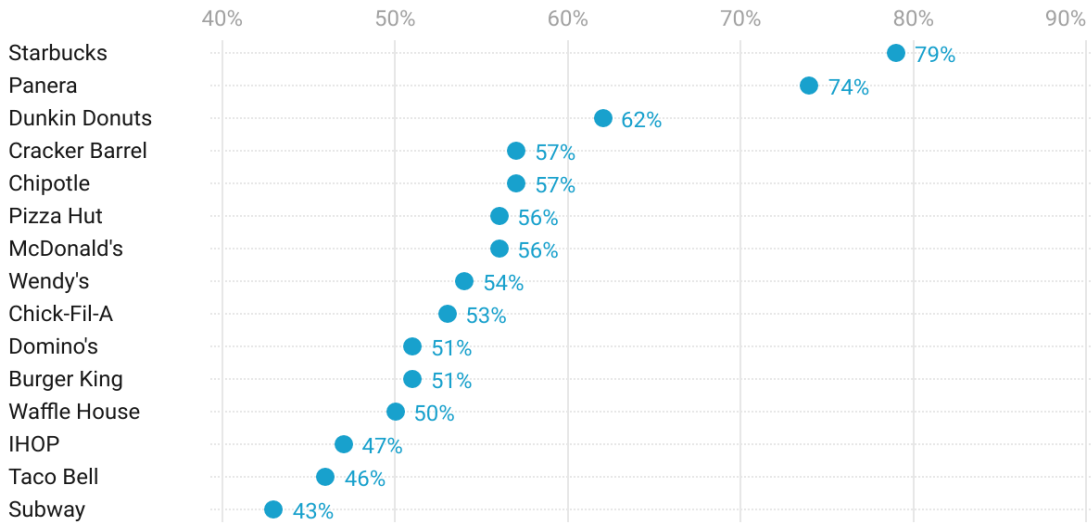
Vaccination rates for service sector workers at large firms increased substantially over the course of 2021 and have consistently tracked those of the general population. In May 2021, 40% of the national population had been fully vaccinated (two doses of Moderna or Pfizer or one dose of J&J), compared to 42% of service sector workers surveyed by Shift. By September of 2021, these rates had risen to 61% of service sector workers and 56% of the general population and these two rates both rose somewhat over the course of the fall of 2021, reaching 68% of service sector workers by November of 2021. However, this rate of vaccination is still low relative to other frontline workers who regularly go to work in-person and indoors. For example, in September of 2021, the rate of vaccination for [health care workers](#) was 70%, against just 61% of service sector workers in that month.



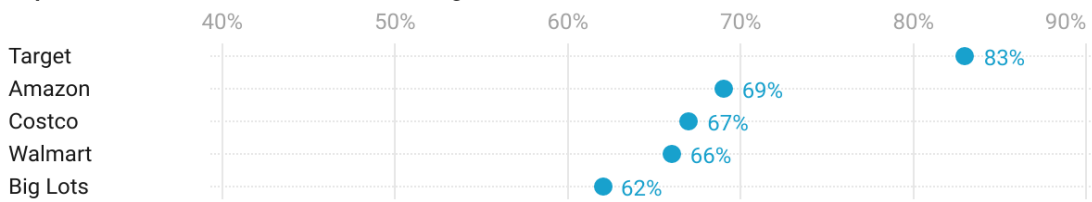
Note: National vaccination rates drawn from [Our World in Data](#)

**Figure 2. Vaccination Rates by Employer in Fall 2021**

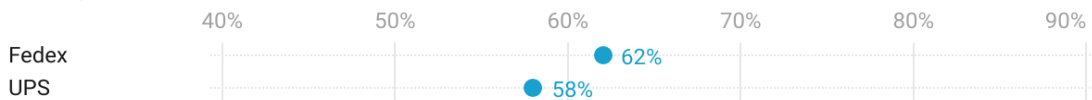
**Restaurants/Food Service**



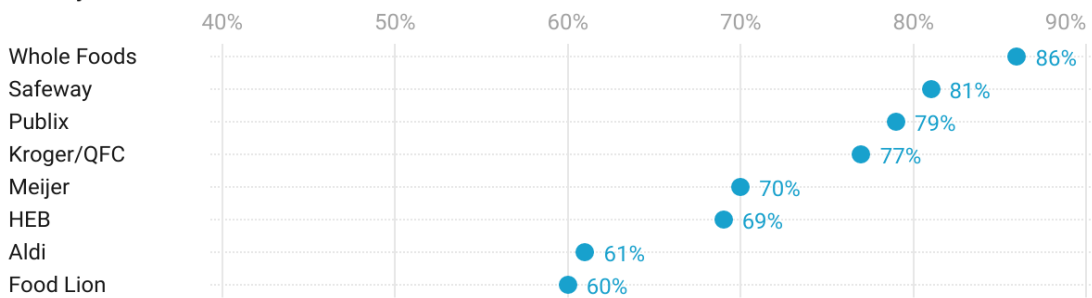
**Department/Discount/General Merchandising**



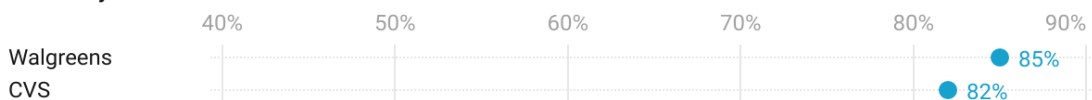
**Delivery**



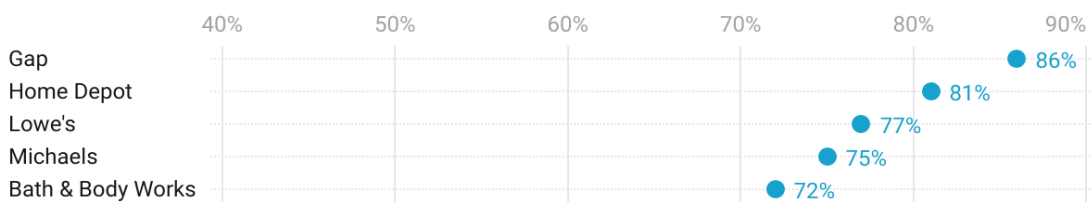
**Grocery**



**Pharmacy**



**Miscellaneous Retail**



## Worker Vaccination Rates by Employer

This overall rate of vaccination disguises significant variation in the share of workers who were vaccinated as of the Fall of 2021 at different large service sector firms. While some of these firms have required office workers to be vaccinated (for instance, [McDonald's](#), [Walmart](#), and [TJX](#) (parent company of TJ Maxx, Marshalls, and Home Goods)), none of these firms have extended mandates to cover all of their front-line hourly workers. Absent mandates, we know little about how common vaccination is among the hourly workers at large firms who regularly interact with co-workers and the public.

In general, large food service employers, including in fast food and casual dining, had the lowest rates of employee vaccination. For instance, just 43% of Subway workers reported being vaccinated as did only about half of Taco Bell workers. The share of workers who were vaccinated was somewhat higher at large firms like McDonald's (56%), Chipotle (57%), and Dunkin Donuts (62%), but in general rates of vaccination are comparatively quite low

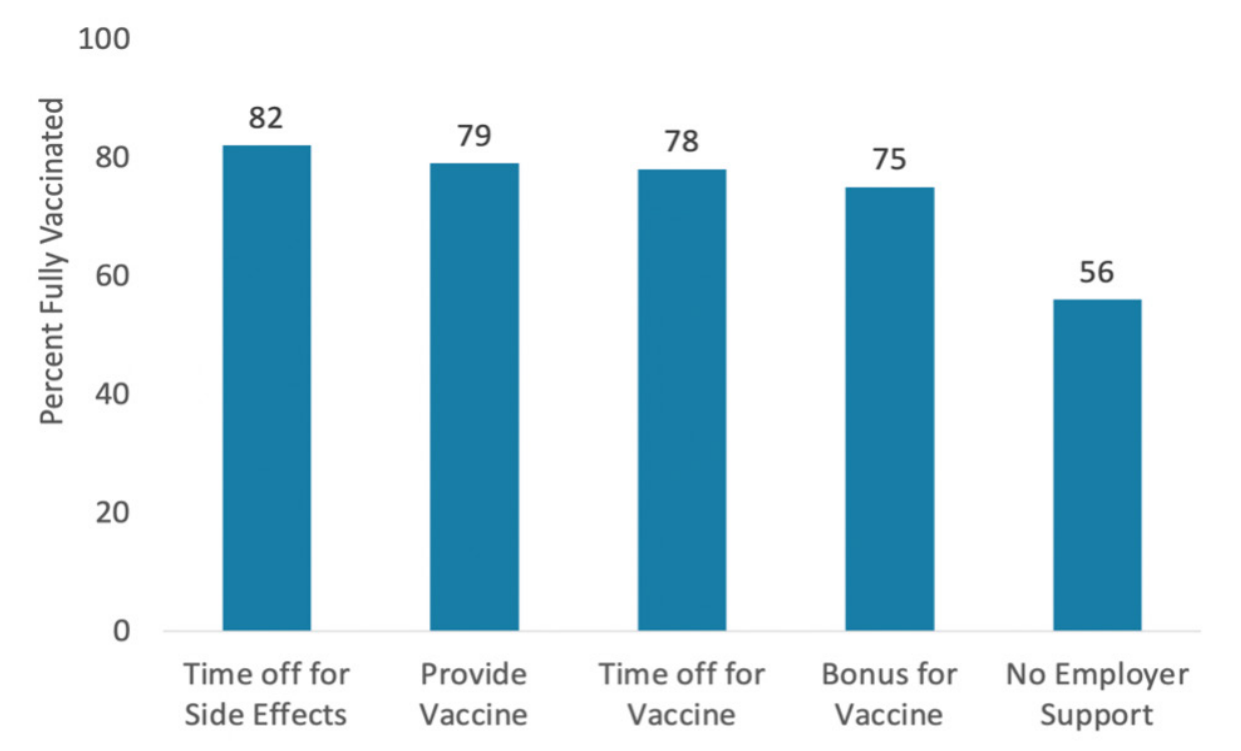
among large food service firms. Compared to other firms in this sector, Starbucks stood out, with 79% of workers reporting being vaccinated.

Rates of vaccination were generally higher, but still far from universal, at firms in the general merchandise sector, with 83% of Target workers reporting vaccination, but only 60% - 70% of workers at Walmart, Costco, Big Lots, and Amazon. While less likely to interact with customers indoors, only about sixty percent of workers at UPS and FedEx reported being vaccinated.

Rates of employee vaccination were also variable in the grocery sector, ranging from 86% of workers at Whole Foods to just 60% of workers at Food Lion. Other major grocers also fell short of full vaccination, with Aldi at 61% of workers and Meijer at 70%, but Publix at 79% and Safeway at 81%.

Rates of vaccination among hourly workers were generally higher in pharmacy, reaching 85% of Walgreens hourly workers and 82% of hourly workers at CVS.

**Figure 3.** Share of Workers Vaccinated by Employer Vaccine Encouragement



## Why Aren't More Workers Vaccinated?

Many service-sector firms have developed policies to encourage workers to get vaccinated, ranging from bonuses of \$100 at [Kroger](#) to 4 hours paid time off at [Target](#). These policies can effectively increase vaccine uptake. For instance, 79% of workers who reported that their employers provided the vaccine at work were vaccinated as were 82% of those who got time off for side-effects. But, only 56% of workers who reported that their employers did not provide any supports were vaccinated.

While these supports have helped, at this point in the pandemic, it appears that vaccine hesitancy and resistance are the major barriers to vaccination among the unvaccinated at large service sector firms. More than half (56%) of unvaccinated hourly service sector workers employed at large firms who we surveyed reported that they were not vaccinated because they did not trust the vaccine. A similarly high share (49%) reported that they were not vaccinated because they were worried about side effects. Less common, but still notable, one-in-five unvaccinated service-sector workers said that they were not vaccinated because they were simply not worried about COVID-19.

Earlier in the pandemic, barriers to vaccination like concerns about cost or trouble getting time off may have shaped behavior. But, by Fall of 2021, we find that these were rarely cited as the reasons for not being vaccinated.

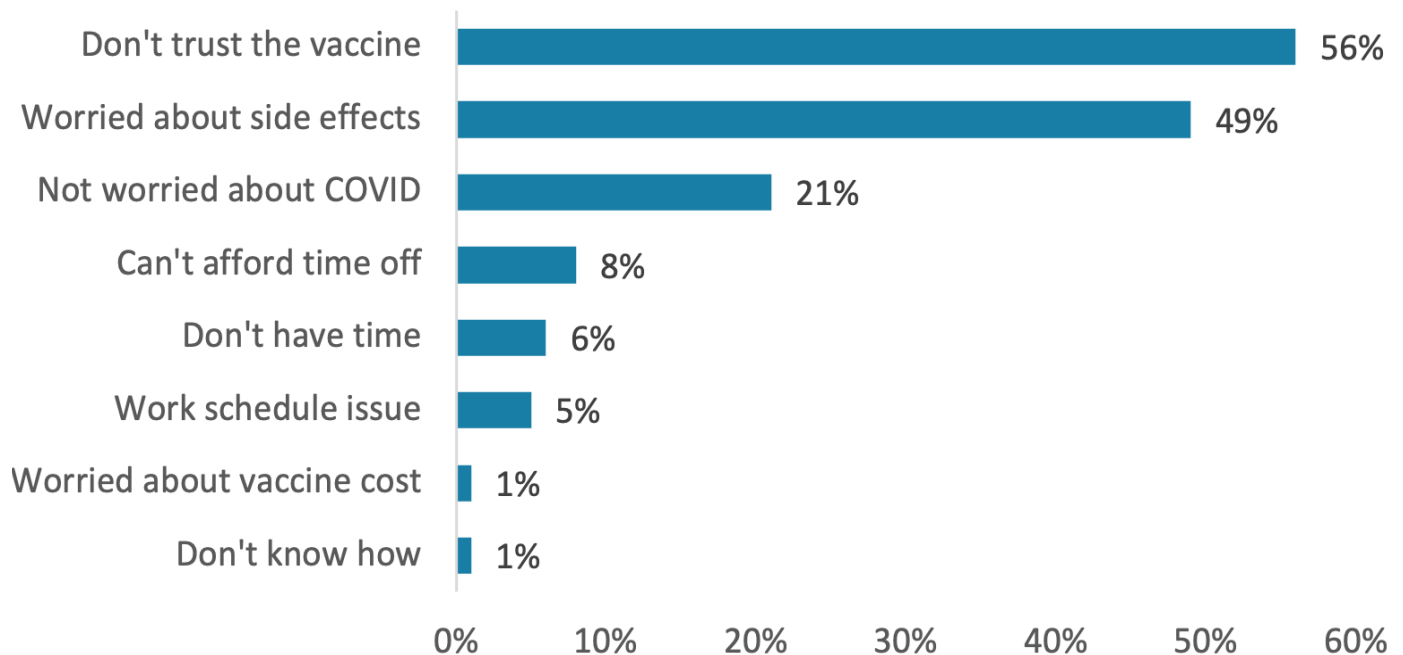
### Discussion

About 6 months after all U.S. adults became eligible for COVID-19 vaccines, nearly seventy percent of hourly workers at large service sector firms reported being fully vaccinated by November of 2021.

We find substantial variation in workers' vaccination rates across employers. While the share vaccinated reached 86% at Whole Foods and 82% at Walgreens, rates of vaccination were substantially lower at many of the country's largest firms, most notably at large fast food and casual dining employers like Subway, Taco Bell, Dominos, Burger King, and Waffle House. At these firms, rates of vaccination remained stuck at the levels last seen in the general population in the Summer of 2021, with only around half of these workers vaccinated.

While employer supports can help move the needle on vaccination, our data also make it clear that the

**Figure 4.** Employee Reported Reasons Why Not Vaccinated



Note: Percentages sum to greater than 100% because workers could report multiple reasons for not being vaccinated.

remaining unvaccinated workers at large service-sector firms are hesitant, if not resistant. Large shares of the unvaccinated report distrust in the vaccine, worries about side-effects, or simply a lack of concern about COVID-19 sufficient to merit vaccination.

But, achieving full vaccination, especially for customer-facing and in-person workers, appears essential for controlling the pandemic. Vaccine mandates appear to be an effective tool for achieving this goal. Mandates introduced in other sectors, including [health care](#) and [public safety](#), show that the requirement to vaccinate can ensure that otherwise hesitant or resistant workers get vaccinated.

While none of the large service sector firms whose workers we surveyed have full vaccine mandates, effective on October 31, [CVS](#) began requiring corporate staff and patient-facing workers such as nurses, care managers, and pharmacists to be vaccinated. Our data shows the efficacy of this approach, with vaccination rates at CVS reaching 86% among pharmacists.

But, OSHA's rule that would require all employers with 100 or more employees to ensure each of their workers is fully vaccinated or tests for COVID-19 on at least a weekly basis, is on hold pending judicial review. When implemented, this rule and other voluntary employer mandates like that at CVS, can close the gap and ensure full vaccination among hourly workers at the country's largest firms. Our findings though also point to important addenda to the rule. In particular, vaccination is lowest at large fast-food employers, many of whom are franchised. To effectively cover these workers, OSHA rule-making must account for the presence of smaller franchise groups in this sector.

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## Methodological Appendix

The Shift Project collected survey data from over 100,000 service sector workers employed at large retail and food establishments across the country between July 2017 and November 2021. This brief focused on a subsample of 5,013 service sector workers interviewed in March to early June of 2021 and 4,341 service sector workers interviewed in September to November of 2021. The survey data collection was national in scope and the survey sample includes respondents from all 50 U.S. states and Washington D.C.

The Shift Project recruits survey respondents using online Facebook advertisements, targeted to workers employed at large retail and food service employers.

Those who responded to the Shift survey invitation were automatically routed to a survey landing page where they were asked to consent to participate in the study, then began the online self-administered survey using the Qualtrics platform. As an incentive, those who completed the survey and provided contact information were entered into a lottery for an Apple iPad or \$500 Amazon gift card. The survey included modules on job characteristics, work schedules, demographics, economic stability, health, parenting, and child outcomes. To screen out invalid survey responses, we used an attention filter (a question that instructed respondents to select a particular response category to verify the accuracy of their responses) as well as a speed filter (discarding data for surveys that were completed too hastily).

We construct survey weights to adjust the demographic characteristics of the Shift survey sample to match the demographic characteristics of service-sector workers in the American Community Survey (ACS) for the years 2008-2019. We align the ACS sample with the Shift sample by selecting workers who are employed in the same occupations and industries

For a detailed discussion of The Shift Project data collection, methodology, and data validation, see Schneider, D. and Harknett, K. 2019. “What’s to Like? Facebook as a Tool for Survey Data Collection.” *Sociological Methods & Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0049124119882477>