

PRESS RELEASE

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Vaccine skepticism in Germany multiplies with novel COVID vaccines

- 13.7 million new vaccine opponents since pandemic onset;
- skepticism mostly exacerbated by fears of long-term damage and fast vaccine approval processes, correlates with corona virus denial;
- 90% of skeptics feel they have no influence over politics, are predominantly AfD-leaning and about 45% attained the lowest level or left secondary school without certification;
- while new skeptics could be convinced by facts, long-term anti-vaccinationists appear unyielding.

The first representative study of COVID-19 vaccine skeptics, conducted by KENUP Foundation, the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences and the EIB Institute, identified the socioeconomic and consumer behavior profile, as well as the dominant values and positions of COVID-19 vaccine skeptics and examined potential strategies to increase willingness to get a COVID-19 vaccine in that cohort.

Vaccination is one of the public health measures that has had the greatest impact on the reduction of the burden from infectious diseases. According to the World Health Organization, vaccines prevent up to 3 million deaths worldwide each year. Vaccines are the most important tool in exiting the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, anti-vaccination sentiments are highest in Europe compared to other regions in the world, potentially undermining vaccination and herd immunity efforts.

Overall, 19.6% of the German population make up the COVID-19 vaccine skeptic group, those unlikely or very unlikely to take the jab once offered to them. Almost 84.2% of that group were not opposed to vaccines before the corona crisis. This means that 13.7 million new skeptics are contributing to the high COVID-19 anti-vaccine sentiment.

COVID-19 vaccine skepticism is mainly driven by the fear of long-term damage (66.0%), the fast approval process (54.7%) and fear of adverse health effects (53.0%). It correlates with corona virus denial: 21.7% of vaccine skeptics and 36.8% of long-term anti-vaccinationists disagree that COVID-19 causes serious health problems. Denial that the virus has infected many people worldwide is 21.8% and 40%, respectively for new skeptics and long-term anti-vaccinationists.

While 69.3% of all vaccine skeptics claim that they could be convinced to take the COVID-19 vaccine through factual assurances, 69.4% of long-term anti-vaccinationists state that nothing would convince them. On the assurances needed for attitudinal change within the overall cohort, exclusion of long-term damage (52.0%), proven effectiveness (40.8%) and the evidence that genes are not changed (32.0%) top the list. Moreover, neither celebrity endorsement nor prospects of long-distance travel are convincing skeptics to be vaccinated. Vaccine skeptics seem to have more trust in vaccines originating from Germany, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Vaccines from Russia, China and especially India would have low chances to convince skeptics.

A prevailing lack of life meaning and political participation defines the cohort of vaccine skeptics: 89.2% feel that they have no influence over politics. Of the long-term anti-vaccinationists, 35.2% express existential fears and financial worries, with life lacking any perspective for 35.6% of them. In terms of political affiliation, the anti-vaccination group is predominantly AfD-leaning (43.0%, far-right), with support of FDP (liberal) and Die Linke (left) also over-represented, while affinity to SPD (centre-left), CDU/CSU (centre-right) and Die Grünen (green) remains significantly underrepresented. Anti-vaccination sentiments are much higher in people of non-Christian religions.

Vaccine skeptics predominantly do not work, or if they do, they are not employed but pursue independent activities. 44.8% of them left secondary school without any certification or attained the lowest certification level. The group predominately lives in households with children and in low density areas with lower purchasing power, with a strong spike in the Eastern German States.

The classical news channels, including television and curated authoritative content on the internet, do not reach the anti-vaccination group, as their media consumption is dominated by YouTube and Facebook. On the other hand, they are predominantly late adopters to technology. The group is further characterized by a high affinity to brands, having fun with friends, DIY, and a low kinship to eco-friendly products.

“We need to act swiftly to address the concerns of this massive cohort of new vaccine skeptics, before people retract into domains outside of participatory democracy. Now is the time to communicate to everyone that EMA approved SARS-CoV-2 vaccines are safe, efficacious and do not alter the human genes”, says Holm Keller, Chairman of KENUP Foundation.

Prof. Dr. Marcel Tanner, President of Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences adds: “Now that COVID-19 vaccination campaigns worldwide have started and are building momentum it is of utmost importance to increase the uptake and willingness to be vaccinated against the coronavirus. This study offers important insights into the cohort of vaccine skeptics and the specific areas of need for communication and information as the survey reveals concerning societal divisions that public health officials need to address. Finally, the study can also serve as a starting point for strengthening policymaking towards reaching and maintaining herd immunity and hence long-term strategies to overcome the pandemic.”

“One of the obstacles facing the vaccination campaign is the reluctance among several groups, including healthcare workers and nursing staff in elderly care facilities. This study should determine the magnitude and intrinsic characteristics of vaccine reluctance and, I hope, will contribute to the design of policy interventions to counter its effect”, says Francisco de Paula Coelho, Dean of the EIB Institute.

The survey was carried out by Civey GmbH, a Berlin based market research and public opinion start-up, from January 18 to February 2, 2021. The final sample size of vaccine skeptics was 2.500 of respondents from Germany. Civey conducts all surveys in real time on more than 25,000 URLs of high-reach websites such as DER SPIEGEL, DIE WELT or T-Online.de. Through this process, Civey recruits participants with a wide range of interests and characteristics for its own panel. The questions cover, for example, politics, business, technology, sports and consumer behaviour and serve as an introduction to the verification process for panelists. A special algorithm ensures that all surveys are conducted evenly across the URLs and within the survey time. Every month, around 15 million participant responses are determined in this way. Before a participant's response is included in the sample, participants are verified. Before the results are determined, possible demographic imbalances are eliminated.

The full report and more information can be found at <https://www.kenup.eu/press>

About kENUP Foundation

kENUP Foundation is a non-profit public benefit foundation supporting research-based innovation in health industries for societal benefit. kENUP initiates public and private investment into innovations with the potential to improve the livelihood of every citizen. The development of such innovations is often hampered by failing markets. Through its work, kENUP aims to change that.

About Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences

The Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences are a research funding institution for networking and dialogue in accordance with the Research and Innovation Promotion Act. They conduct and promote the early identification of socially relevant topics in the field of education, research and innovation, network the scientific community, are committed to the perception of ethical responsibility in research and teaching and shape the dialogue between science and society to promote mutual understanding.

About EIB Institute

The EIB Institute was set up within the EIB Group (European Investment Bank and European Investment Fund) to promote and support social, cultural and academic initiatives with European stakeholders and the public at large. It is a key pillar of the EIB Group's community and citizenship engagement. The Institute notably aims at channeling support, through grants and sponsorships, to higher education and research activities.

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