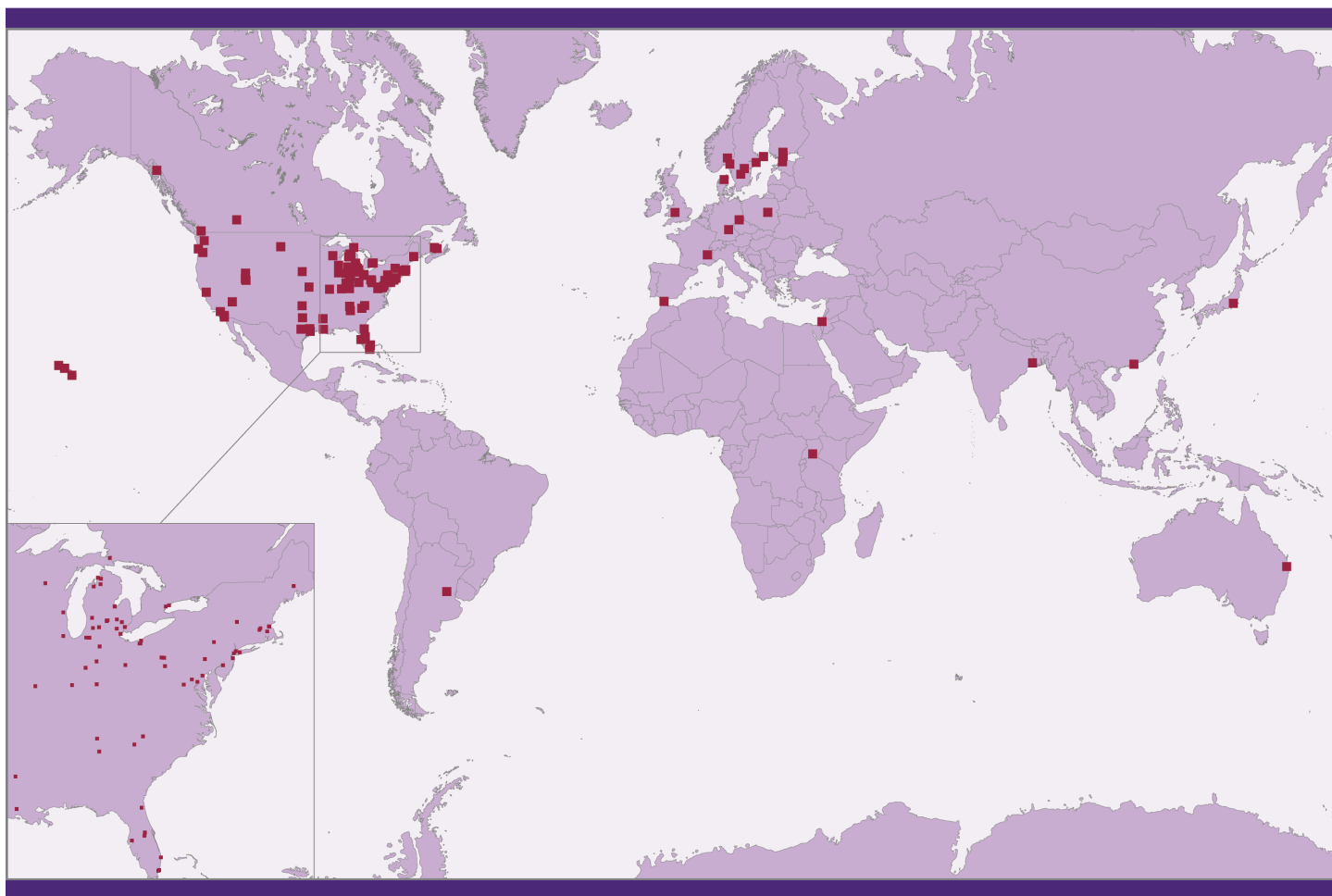


COVID-19 Vaccination for People with Severe Mental Illness



International Survey of Clubhouses

REPORT PRODUCED WITH

COVID-19 Vaccination for People with Severe Mental Illness

An International Survey of Clubhouses

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

People with serious mental illness are often on the outskirts of society, hidden from view of the public and policymakers. As a result, individuals with the most severe psychiatric disorders, including schizophrenia and severe bipolar disorder, are often overlooked or ignored by governmental policy.

This invisibility was never more apparent than in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many people with severe mental illness live in congregate living facilities, which were some of the locations hit hardest by the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 that causes COVID-19. Additionally, the rush to slow the spread of the pandemic left few resources for mental health services; doctors, hospitals and other medical facilities were forced to focus all their attention on combatting the pandemic.

In many cases, this meant repurposing psychiatric hospital beds for overflow COVID-19 patients or limiting admissions due to risks of COVID-19 spread. At the same time that there was increased attention to the mental health needs of Americans due to the stress, isolation and grief of the pandemic, access to needed care for individuals with the most severe mental illnesses began to disappear. All of these factors led to an increased burden on those with severe mental illness, putting them at higher risk of contracting COVID-19 and neglecting their mental health needs.

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Furthermore, research shows that schizophrenia is the second-highest risk factor for death from COVID-19. Other research indicates that people with severe mental illness are far less likely to receive the annual flu vaccine than the general population. These factors combined indicate that this group should have been prioritized to receive the COVID-19 vaccine with targeted outreach as early as possible. Public health experts suggest targeted outreach programs for people with severe mental illness as the best practice to facilitate COVID-19 vaccinations in the population.

There is substantial published research that supports serious mental illness as a medical condition associated with high risk for severe COVID-19:

- There is a 1.7 times greater risk of dying from COVID-19 for people with serious mental illness.¹
- Schizophrenia is the second largest risk factor for mortality from COVID-19, second only to age.²
- COVID-19 patients with schizophrenia have higher in-hospital mortality yet lower intensive care unit admissions.³

Nevertheless, targeted outreach and prioritization during the COVID-19 vaccine rollout did not occur in many states. Fortunately, there were community groups working to protect the health of people with severe mental illness to ensure they had access to the COVID-19 vaccine. Many of these groups were Clubhouses, which provide community centers for those living with severe mental illness.

In partnership with Clubhouse International, a community-based membership organization of 322 Clubhouses throughout the world, the Office of Research and Public Affairs at the Treatment Advocacy Center conducted an international survey of all Clubhouses to understand the barriers to and facilitators of COVID-19 vaccination among Clubhouse members.

The results are proof that efforts to invest in people with serious mental illness can make a difference. The results from the survey indicate the following:

- Estimated vaccination rates of Clubhouse members in the U.S. are, on average, significantly higher than those of the U.S. population.
- Concerns about the vaccine's safety and side effects are the top two reasons why people with serious mental illness may not get the vaccine.
- Vaccine hesitancy is not the only driver for people with serious mental illness to not receive the COVID-19 vaccine. Logistical and administrative barriers to getting an appointment or transportation to the vaccination site are also prominent.
- Sharing of experiences among peers is the most effective tool in changing minds around vaccination.

Overall, the findings indicate that community investment in people with serious mental illness can have a tremendous impact on their health and well-being. Now is the time to provide proper resources and support to people with serious mental illness and ensure that they are no longer pushed to the shadows. Governments, health care and social systems must create policies and practices and provide adequate resources in order to help people with serious mental illness live successful, fulfilling lives well into the post-COVID-19 future.

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The Treatment Advocacy Center is a national nonprofit organization dedicated exclusively to eliminating barriers to the timely and effective treatment of severe mental illness. The organization promotes laws, policies and practices for the delivery of psychiatric care and supports the development of innovative treatments for and research into the causes of severe and persistent psychiatric illnesses, such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.

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