

NHS England criticised over missing ethnicity data for covid-19 jabs

HEALTH 27 January 2021

By [Loyal Liverpool](#)



A woman receives a covid-19 vaccine, at the Al-Abbas Islamic Centre, in Balsall Heath, Birmingham, UK, 21 January
REUTERS/Carl Recine

NHS England is facing growing criticism from public health leaders over its failure to publish data on the ethnicity of people who have been vaccinated against [covid-19](#).

Leaders at the British Medical Association, the Association of Directors of Public Health and the independent NHS Race and Health Observatory are among those calling for this data to be released in real-time in England and across the UK as a whole.

The swift release of data is vital, says Chaand Nagpaul of the British Medical Association. “It gives you a snapshot understanding of the level of vaccination coverage amongst ethnic minority health care workers and the community so that you can then target your effort to try and address lower uptake of the vaccine,” he says.

Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) people in the UK have been [disproportionately affected by covid-19](#), and some in these groups also seem more hesitant about receiving a vaccine. A recent UK [survey](#) conducted by Elaine Robertson at the University of Glasgow and colleagues shows high enthusiasm for vaccination overall, but the team found significant differences between ethnic groups. The highest levels of vaccine hesitancy were among Black ethnic groups, followed by Pakistani and Bangladeshi groups. “It will be vitally important to know to what degree vaccine hesitancy is affecting uptake of the vaccine and you will only know if you have the figures,” says Nagpaul.

“Live, real-time data on vaccination uptake by ethnicity should be made available and published so that we can better meet the needs of our diverse communities,” says Habib Naqvi, director of the NHS Race and Health Observatory.

Read more: [We must start publishing ethnicity data for covid-19 vaccinations](#)

On 26 January – seven weeks after the UK’s covid-19 vaccination programme began – UK vaccines minister Nadhim Zahawi said [ethnicity data is being recorded and will be published “very soon”](#). But, when asked by *New Scientist*, NHS England didn’t answer questions about when the recording of ethnicity data for covid-19 vaccinations began, nor about when the data would be published.

An NHS England spokesperson said: “The NHS shared data on vaccination uptake with local authorities two weeks ago and with the quality of data improving all the time we will look to make more available once verified.” *New Scientist* understands local authorities should have ethnicity data on covid-19 vaccinations for their areas as of this week.

“We’re told that the ethnicity data will come this week,” says Jim McManus, vice president of the Association of Directors of Public Health. “[But] no one seems to be able to tell me a clear answer [as to] whether they’ve been collecting ethnicity data, or whether they are relying on existing [healthcare records], and if it’s the latter then I think the data will be incomplete.” Ethnicity data is only thought to be [recorded in about 60 to 70 per cent of healthcare records](#) held by family doctors in England, and not everyone receiving the vaccine will be registered with a doctor, says McManus.

A preliminary study has already identified [emerging disparities in the uptake of covid-19 vaccines](#) in England. Ben Goldacre at the University of Oxford and his team used the family doctor healthcare records of 23.4 million people in England to try to retrospectively identify demographic trends among those who had received at least one dose of a covid-19 vaccine as of 13 January.

Read more: [An unequal society means covid-19 is hitting ethnic minorities harder](#)

The researchers found that among the approximately 1.1 million people aged 80 and over who don't live in a care home, 476,375 had received a first dose of covid-19 vaccine. But they found substantial differences in levels of vaccination by ethnicity within that group, with the level at 42.5 per cent among those of white ethnicity, compared to just 20.5 per cent among Black ethnic groups. The figure was between 27 and 29.5 per cent for people of mixed, other and South Asian ethnicities. A large proportion of records, 28.1 per cent, included no ethnicity data, and of this group 39.7 per cent had been vaccinated.

But Nagpaul says retrospective studies like this aren't sufficient to protect people at risk. "It's not a research project, that's why it's important to do it real-time, as we do for other vaccination programmes," he says.

There are also concerns about the lack of equivalent data available in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. A spokesperson for Public Health Scotland said: "Ethnicity data is not currently available for individuals that have received their first dose of the covid-19 vaccine in Scotland. Work is underway to link ethnicity information onto the vaccination dataset and we will publish this in due course."

Public Health Wales told *New Scientist* that it is "working with academic colleagues [at] Swansea University to carry out enhanced surveillance of vaccine uptake equity, including analysis by ethnic groups" and plans to report preliminary findings in February.

The Department of Health in Northern Ireland wasn't able to provide a comment before publication.

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