



This “Health on Wheels” mobile brigade provided COVID-19 vaccinations and primary care services to the residents of San Pedro Cachá, a municipality in Guatemala’s Alta Verapaz department. Photo credit: PAHO

COVID-19 vaccination rates rising in countries with PAHO-supported immunization campaigns

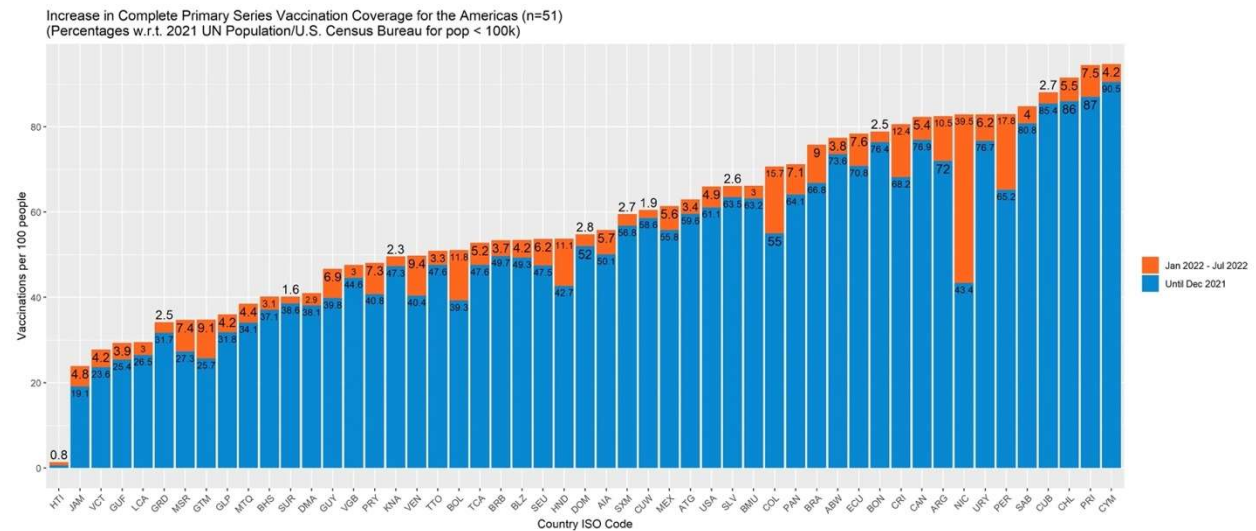
Guatemala

When Guatemala’s Ministry of Public Health and Social Welfare noted the low COVID-19 vaccination rates in the country’s rural areas, officials sought the help of village *comadronas*, Mayan midwives highly respected as keepers of traditional medical practices. The health ministry reached out to the *comadronas* – and other religious and community leaders – explaining the safety and importance of COVID-19 immunization. Many village leaders became vaccination promoters, counteracting disinformation that was fueling deep antipathy to COVID-19 vaccines.

The strategy is part of Guatemala’s broader effort to generate demand for COVID-19 vaccines and increase its low immunization rates. Guatemala is one of many countries in Latin America and the

Caribbean that are employing ambitious COVID-19 vaccination campaigns, supported this year by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and US government (USG) financing through the American Rescue Plan Act 2021. Midway through 2022, it is still too early to determine the full effect of these efforts. However, during the first six months of 2022, COVID-19 vaccination rates in Latin American and Caribbean countries increased an average 9.1% to 68.7%.

The higher rate reflects significant improvement, especially given that demand for COVID-19 vaccination has stagnated as the sense of urgency around the pandemic has faded. Equally important, the increase includes strong improvement in countries that face formidable barriers to immunization.



Increase in vaccination rates during the first six months of 2022 in Latin American and Caribbean countries.

Guatemala is among those countries. Distrust of COVID-19 vaccines in Mayan regions has been so high that roadblocks were erected to keep out vaccinators. In response, the health ministry last year launched a far-reaching communications campaign. Vaccination guidebooks and other materials have been translated into Mayan languages, Spanish dialects, as well as Xinca and Garifuna languages. Radio and TV spots, text messages, and social media, all in local languages, amplify pro-vaccination messaging.

This year, the health ministry followed up with “Health on Wheels” brigades. Coordinated with community-elected liaisons and local health districts, 15 medical brigades are taking COVID-19 vaccines into villages in the Alta Verapaz department. The vaccines are integrated into primary care services, so that when families arrive for wellness checks and routine immunization, they are encouraged to get the COVID-19 vaccine as well.

Improvement in Guatemala’s COVID-19 vaccination rates is already evident. By the end of June, 34.8% of the country’s population had received the full schedule of COVID-19 vaccine doses, compared to 25.7% at the end of December 2021.

Honduras



With PAHO support, Honduras’ health ministry has worked to overcome vaccine hesitancy, particularly pronounced among parents concerned because of misinformation about side effects in children.

In Honduras’s densely populated cities, Ministry of Health vaccination brigades go door to door, bringing the COVID-19 vaccine into residents’ homes. The campaign, which includes routine immunization, has been particularly effective because Ministry of Health vaccinators are able to reassure reluctant residents in person that the vaccines are safe. Further, the brigades take place on the weekends when urban residents are more often at home.

Honduras has also launched a communications campaign, with messaging focused on the safety of vaccines, promoting child vaccination, and reminding people to complete their vaccination schedules and get boosters. Risk communications strategies have been adapted for Lenca, Miskito and Garifuna communities, and for migrant groups. For these communities, small radio stations have been used to transmit messages in local languages.

Further, cold chain capacity has been expanded, enabling vaccination campaigns to reach more isolated regions of the country. PAHO's procurement for Honduras includes 92 vaccine refrigerators, 25 solar refrigeration systems, 840 cold packs, 10 insulated carriers, 10,000 secure vaccine boxes, and 150 thermoses.

These strategies have contributed to an 11.1 increase in COVID-19 vaccination rates in Honduras. By midyear, 53.8% of Honduras' population had received the full schedule of COVID-19 vaccines, compared to 42.7 % at the end of December 2021.

Bolivia

Like Guatemala, Bolivia faces complex obstacles to widespread COVID-19 vaccination. Distrust of COVID-19 vaccines has been high, especially in rural zones. Compounding communication problems, some 36 indigenous languages are spoken in Bolivia, many of them as first languages. Further, Bolivia's health services have limited resources for reaching isolated rural communities, and often lack sufficient personnel to administer vaccines.



Bolivia's April-May immunization drive included residents of the city of Trinidad in the Beni department. Photo credit: PAHO

In April, Bolivia's Ministry of Health launched a two-month drive to increase COVID-19 vaccination as well as routine immunization. The health ministry deployed 1,000 two-person vaccination brigades in nine departments in the country. To increase low vaccination rates among indigenous populations, brigades traveled to Amazonian communities. Bolivia's drive has included a multilingual communications campaign, with radio, TV, and social media messaging, outreach to local influencers, and press conferences with the health ministry.

By the end of the April-May drive, 632,231 COVID-19 vaccine doses had been administered. The drive has contributed to the increased vaccination rate throughout the country during the first six months of 2022. During that period, the percentage of people who received the full schedule of COVID-19 vaccines rose 11.8% to 51.1%, compared to 39.3% in December 2021.

PAHO is now supporting a campaign to increase vaccination in 30 municipalities with vaccination rates below 50%. The drive, which involves advocacy and social mobilization as well as communications, has targeted low-information rural areas. Throughout this year, the health ministry has focused on vaccinating vulnerable groups, and immunization of pregnant women is a national priority.