



The  
ROCKEFELLER  
FOUNDATION

# Covid Complications:

## Insights and Guidance on Ongoing Pandemic Communication

OCTOBER 2021



## ABOUT THIS MESSAGE BRIEF

Since September 2020, The Rockefeller Foundation has commissioned Hattaway Communications to conduct quantitative and qualitative surveys on Americans' attitudes towards Covid-19 actions, addressing testing, vaccines, incentives, and mandates. The fifth wave of the survey was fielded the morning after President Biden announced his vaccine plan with its focus on expanding mandates. The survey found significant shifts in attitudes about the pandemic since the last wave, revealing important findings for how to communicate with Americans about mandates and other public health guidance.

In this brief, we provide high-level audience insights and message recommendations looking at three big topics that are top of mind for public health communicators: the need for mandates, how to address pandemic fatigue, and the rationale for why public health guidance changes over time.

### Methodology

*Fielded online, Sept 14-24, 2021*

n=1,207 U.S. adults, including oversamples of Black respondents, Latinx respondents, and frontline workers



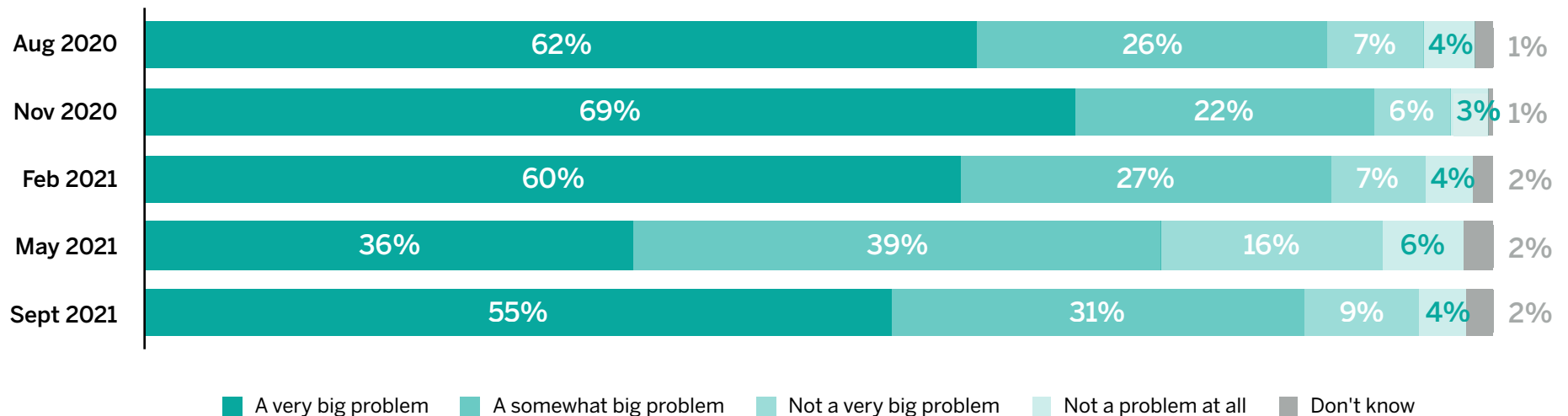
# Audience Insights

Over the last few months, the public has increased in concerns about the pandemic, how it is affecting their communities, and their personal risks. To sum it up, attitudes in September feel like we are back where we were in February, compared to the increased optimism we saw in May.

## Covid-19 remains a big problem

**National pessimism:** The percent of U.S. adults who feel that Covid-19 is a “very big problem” for the country has **increased to 55% from 36%** in Wave 4, nearly back to the 60% seen in February.

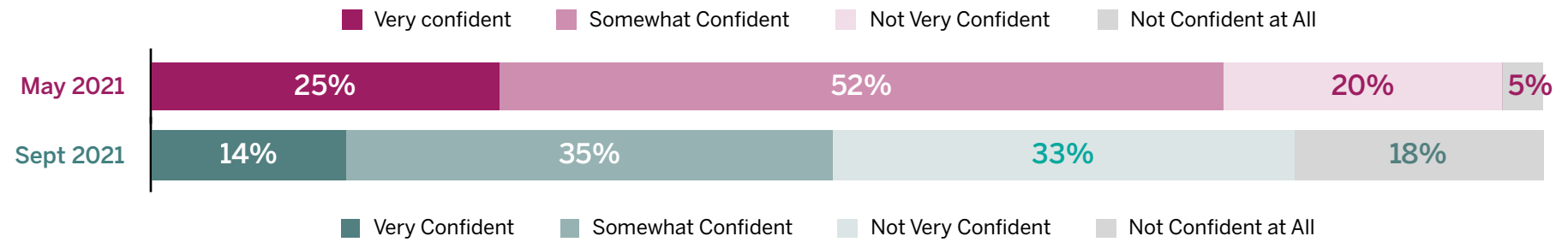
Q16: In your opinion, how big a problem is the current situation in America regarding Covid-19? % Overview



## People feel less safe

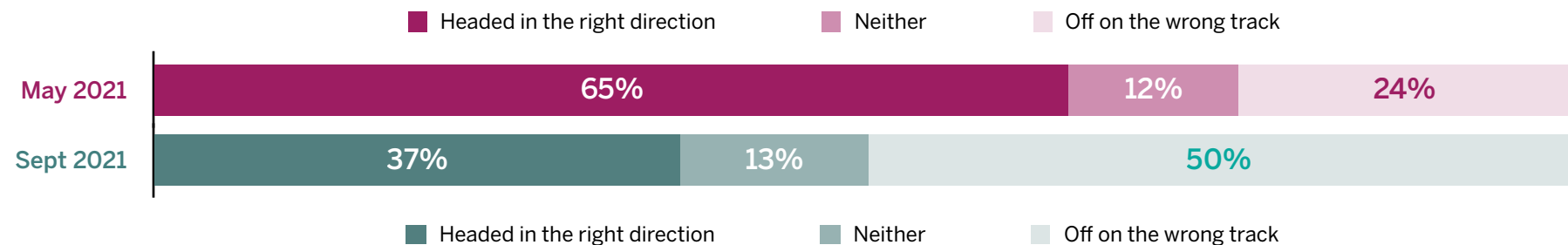
**Community discomfort:** Fewer than 50% of people are confident that the virus has been contained in their community, compared to 76% in May.

Q17: How confident are you that Covid-19 has been successfully contained in your local community? % Overview



**National worries:** The perception that the country is on the wrong track has doubled from May to September.

Q20: Regarding Covid-19, do you think that the country is currently headed in the right direction or is off on the wrong track? % Overview



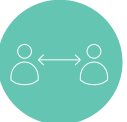






## But people are personally concerned

**Increasingly concerned:** The proportion of adults concerned about contracting Covid-19 personally has also increased, although not as sharply (**64% from 57%**).

**Personally protected:** Protective behaviors (e.g., hand washing, mask wearing, etc.) are up across the board.

% of U.S. adults who are very willing to:

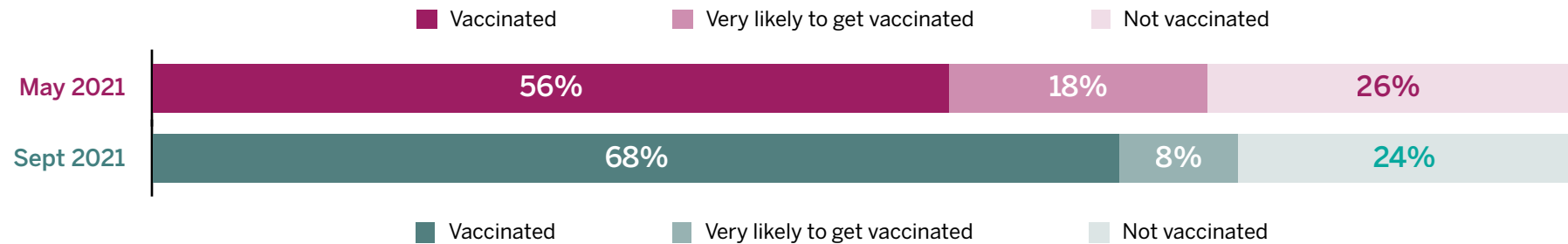
% "very willing" to take each action	 Washing your hands thoroughly	 Wearing a mask	 Staying 6 feet away from other people	 Getting vaccinated	 Staying home as much as possible	 Getting tested for Covid-19	 Talking to a public health worker for contact tracing
Wave 2	82	78	76	—	66	59	49
Wave 3	72	67	64	47	54	49	40
Wave 4	70	62	60	54	49	48	36
Wave 5	79	65	68	58	54	55	41

## Vaccinations are up, but faith in them is down

That said, people have learned to protect themselves during the pandemic, and because they have felt increasingly at risk, they have gone back to taking protective actions that benefited them earlier on.

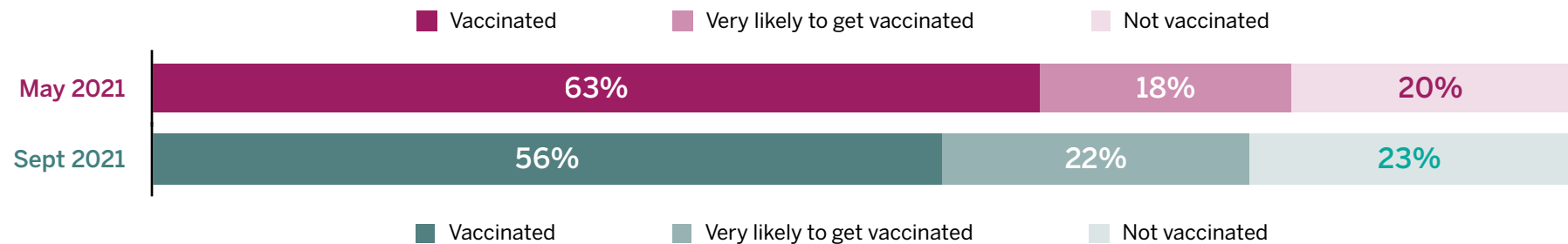
More people are vaccinated compared to May (**68% from 56%**).

Q36: Which of the following reflects your vaccine status? % Overview



However, fewer people are confident that it will make a huge difference.

Q21: How confident are you in each of the following: The vaccine will help life get back to normal. % Overview



# Message Recommendations

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Over the course of five surveys, we have explored how attitudes toward the pandemic have changed over time, what encourages people to get tested, and what motivates or prevents them from getting vaccinated.

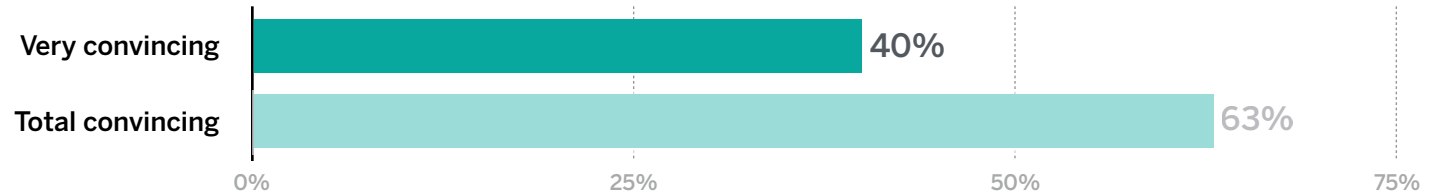
This fifth wave of research directly addressed key aspects of the national conversation that emerged as the pandemic continued toward a second full year. The survey was fielded immediately after the White House's announcement about vaccine **mandates** across the country and found what messages work to explain them; how people can stay motivated about personal and public safety amidst **pandemic fatigue**; and what best explains **shifts in public health guidance**.



## DO IT FOR THEM

### MOTIVATING MESSAGES: MANDATES

During the pandemic, we've all seen first hand how our own actions can affect others who are trying to avoid getting Covid-19. Mandates are important to ensure that everyone does their part to reduce infections and get the pandemic under control.



### WHY IT WORKS

This message explicitly acknowledges social connections and how we are tied together. It doesn't shame or criticize anyone for past behaviors. Instead, it quickly conveys the positive, specific future effects of mandates both in reducing infections and helping people regain the sense of control that has been missing in their lives during the pandemic. This message reassures people that they have individual power over their lives.

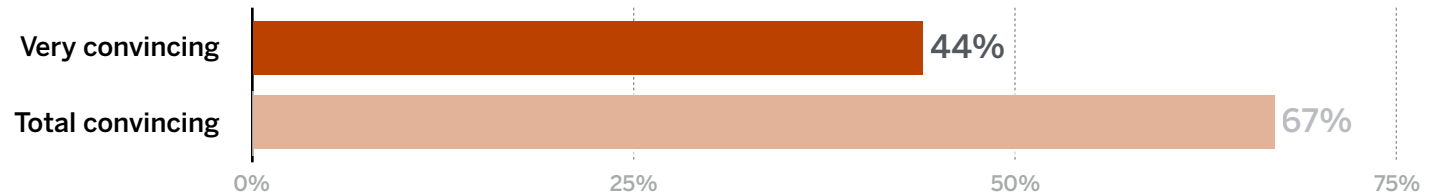




DO OUR PART

### MOTIVATING MESSAGES: PANDEMIC FATIGUE

We can end this pandemic if we can all come together and do our part. Getting vaccinated and supporting public health guidance like mask wearing are powerful actions you can take that will help to end this pandemic at last.



### WHY IT WORKS

This message gets straight to our shared aspiration to end the pandemic and builds confidence that we can do it together. Notably, it doesn't repeat concerns. The message reminds people that they have powerful choices and individual power in changing the course of the pandemic, but without framing it as a "must" or an ultimatum, which repeatedly tests less successfully in our surveys. Active verbs, compared to abstract concepts about public health, give the audience a sense of agency, and they are easier to understand.

The message also uses the persuasive, proven method of social proof, which indicates a general norm and that others are taking the same action. Individuals are often motivated by seeing and hearing that there is social momentum around them for something important—and that they can play a part in it, too.



SAFETY FOR ALL



WE LEARN  
MORE EVERY  
DAY

## MOTIVATING MESSAGES: CHANGING GUIDANCE

The next two messages work closely together to address how and why public health guidance changes.

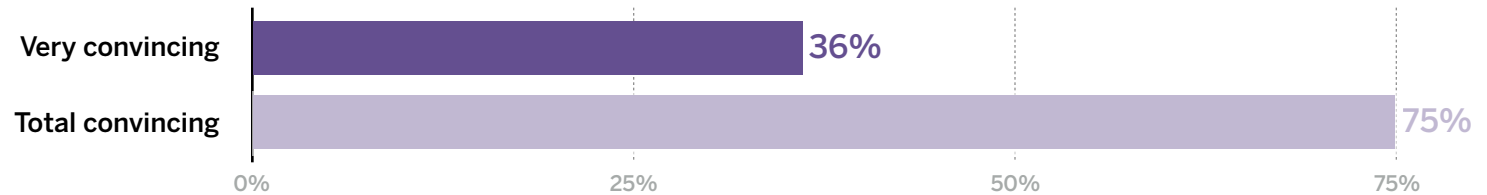
The first message focuses on our aspirational goal of keeping communities safe—and keeps communities front and center. It also presents a story, where our problem is serious illness from Covid-19, with public health offering the solution for everyone. The second message elaborates on how public health departments do it, providing a vivid, day-to-day picture of their work. The messages complement each other to convey the way public health guidance adapts to an evolving problem.



SAFETY FOR ALL

## MOTIVATING MESSAGES: CHANGING GUIDANCE

The job of public health is to keep communities safe. We look at all the science and data, and then make guidance decisions based on what is best for everyone in the community, particularly those at greatest risk of serious illness from Covid-19.



## WHY IT WORKS

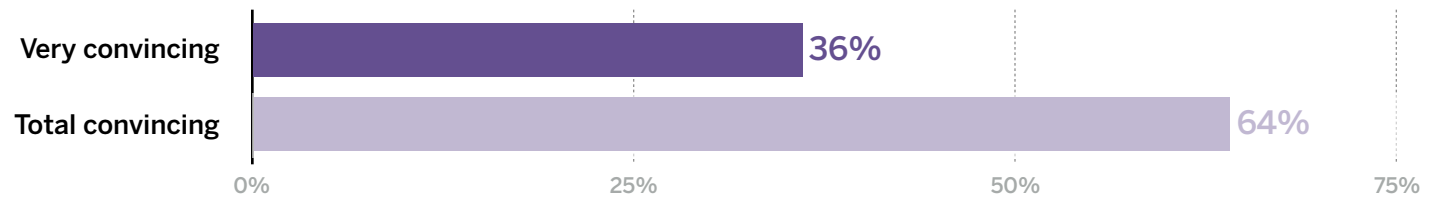
Rather than beginning by explaining what public health does, this message immediately connects it to the deep need and shared goal we all have for safety. The message highlights how specific evidence makes public health guidance credible and trustworthy, while also clarifying that science and data are not ends in themselves, but tools that lead to our collective greater good.



WE LEARN  
MORE EVERY  
DAY

### MOTIVATING MESSAGES: CHANGING GUIDANCE

Every day, we learn more about how Covid-19 is transmitted, how it is evolving, and what we can do to stop it. As we learn more, public health departments use this new data to make science-based updates to our guidance.



### WHY IT WORKS

This message taps into the reality of what people have experienced throughout the pandemic. It creates a mental framework for why public health guidance changes in straightforward, relatable terms. It makes public health departments the lead actors and reinforces their role on the frontlines of the pandemic. The idea that they are working “every day” creates the sense of a vigilant team doing rigorous, timely, and constantly updated work.



