

College COVID-19 vaccinations saved lives, protected communities, study says

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Tulane Assistant Professor Emily Cook co-authored a new study that found the COVID-19 vaccinations at four-year colleges helped avert almost 7,300 deaths within their surrounding communities last fall. (Photo by Rusty Costanza)

A new study co-authored by a Tulane University economist shows how COVID-19 vaccinations at four-year colleges helped save lives within their surrounding communities.

Colleges that required COVID vaccinations averted an average of 339 COVID cases per 100,000 residents and almost 7,300 deaths during the study period, according to researchers.

“This accounts for approximately 5% of U.S. COVID-19 deaths during this period,” said Emily Cook, assistant professor of economics at Tulane University School of Liberal Arts. “Given the mandates mostly impacted students who are very unlikely to die from COVID-19, we argue that virtually all of these saved lives are due to reduction in transmission to other members of the community.”

Cook co-authored the study with Riley K. Acton of Miami University, Wenjia Cao and Scott A. Imberman of Michigan State University and Michael F. Lovenheim of Cornell University.

Colleges and universities in the United States that required the COVID-19 vaccine saw a reduction in COVID-19 deaths of 5.4 per 100,000 population in their surrounding communities during the first 13 weeks of the fall 2021 semester, according to the [working paper](#) published online last month by the National Bureau of Economic Research.

Beginning with the spring of 2021, nearly 700 colleges and universities, including Tulane, required their students to receive a COVID-19 vaccine. The group used data on colleges’ vaccination policies and semester start dates, along with a variety of county-level public health outcomes, to provide the first estimates of the effects of these mandates on the communities surrounding four-year residential colleges.

Vaccine requirements had the most significant impact in areas where college students made up a larger portion of the county population and where students were less likely to be vaccinated. In these areas, the researchers estimated that cases were reduced by 966 per 100,000 county residents and deaths by 23 per 100,000 county residents.

According to Cook, vaccinations affect not only the individual but also the people with whom they come into contact, including those within their community.

“This study is an especially compelling setting to research the community-level impacts of vaccination. College students are unlikely to suffer severe health consequences from COVID-19, but our results demonstrate that vaccinating college students did help the more vulnerable populations in college communities,” Cook said.



Emily Cook, assistant professor of economics at Tulane University School of Liberal Arts, stated that vaccinations affect not only the individual but also the people with whom they come into contact, including those within their community. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)