The Nation's Capital Can't Vaccinate its Residents

Timothy Noah

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Every metric puts D.C. one or two notches up from dead last. Even Mississippi does it better. Why isn't this a bigger story?

Back in 1991, William Niskanen, chairman of the libertarian Cato Institute, observed that local government in Washington, D.C. was clearly worse than the government of any state. District expenditures per resident, excluding the cost of special federal services in Washington, are about twice the national average of state and local expenditures. Despite the high level of District spending, the performance of students in the public schools is lower than in any state, and the murder rate, infant mortality rate, and several other measures of social pathology are higher than in any state.

Today's D.C. government is much better-run than it was back then. Although D.C. continues to perform poorly by many yardsticks when compared to the 50 states, it's much improved when compared to other cities, which usually makes more sense. In 1991, no American city had a higher murder rate than Washington, D.C. Today, D.C. doesn't even make the top 10.

But when I look at the statistics about Covid vaccinations, I feel like we're back in the Bad Old Days, and I wonder why the *Washington Post*, even granting its de-emphasis on local news under Jeff Bezos, isn't reporting to its readers just how comprehensive a failure D.C.'s Covid vaccination effort has been compared to that of other jurisdictions.

In many contexts, comparing D.C. to the 50 states puts D.C. at an unfair disadvantage. When looking at statistics about things like poverty and crime, D.C. should be compared to other cities, not states, because in geographic and demographic terms D.C. is a city. But when looking at statistics about Covid vaccinations, comparing D.C. to the states should put D.C. at an *advantage*. That's because, compared to the states, D.C. is geographically small (69 square miles) and has a tiny population (about 700,000). By comparison, Rhode Island, the smallest state, is 1,214 square miles, or about 18 times bigger than D.C. Among the states, only Vermont and Wyoming have smaller populations than D.C., and they're spread over much larger areas—9,623 square miles and 97,105 square miles, respectively.

All this means that even when you take into account that D.C. lacks a vote in Congress—yes, I'm for D.C. statehood—it ought to be *a lot easier* to vaccinate D.C. residents than the residents of any state. Yet, D.C. is lagging almost every state.

NPR put together some charts, updated daily, using data from the Centers for Disease Control, and if you live in the District, as I do, they are deeply discouraging.

How much of the population is vaccinated fully? Nationally, 12.6 percent. In D.C., 10.1 percent. Among the states, only Utah has a lower rate (8.9 percent).

How much of the population has received at least one vaccination dose? Nationally, 23.3 percent. In D.C., 19.8 percent. Among the states, only Georgia and Alabama have lower rates (16.7 percent and 19.1 percent, respectively).

Even Mississippi, *the poorest state in the U.S.*, is crushing the District of Columbia in administering Covid vaccine.

According to the District's website, the percentages of the D.C. population that are fully vaccinated or have received at least one dose are even lower than what's reported on NPR's chart, at 6.8 percent and 14.2 percent. The discrepancy is explained when you notice that D.C.'s chart was last updated one week ago. That's entirely consistent with D.C.'s overall poor performance.

Well, you say, D.C. has a problem that the 50 states don't have. It got stuck vaccinating a lot of federal employees and frontline workers who live in Maryland or Virginia but work in D.C. By one reckoning, about 40 percent of D.C.'s vaccine doses have gone to our version of the bridge-and-tunnel set. (Only about one-quarter of the people who work in D.C. live in D.C. because it's too expensive.)

But that shouldn't affect the *total number of shots given*, right? That statistic just tells you how many jabs there have been, never mind in whose arm.

According to a chart compiled by the *New York Times*, D.C. has given 296,647 shots. That's fewer than in any state except Vermont (266,120) and Wyoming (220,993), where, I repeat, the populations are scattered over a much larger area.

Another metric that should be unaffected by whether shots are administered to people living in D.C. or outside it is the percentage of doses a jurisdiction receives that actually get administered. Nationally, according to NPR's chart, it's 77 percent. In Washington, it's 66 percent. Only Georgia is less efficient at distributing the vaccines at its disposal (65 percent).

The *New York Times* has slightly different figures, but D.C. ranks very low there, too, at 67 percent, putting it ahead only of Arkansas (66 percent) and on par with Alabama (also 67 percent).

Look, I am happy to wait my turn. I'm 63, and I've been waiting patiently. By all means, vaccinate the people who are 65 and older first and the people with underlying conditions (one of them my wife, who, incidentally, is also still awaiting her first jab). I also agree that D.C. should take pains not to let people from affluent white ZIP codes within the city, like mine, jump the queue.

But for crying out loud, it's now three months since the vaccinations started, and more than half the states have administered *more doses than D.C. has people*, even counting those out-of-staters getting jabbed here. The excuses made by and for the District government are no longer persuasive. D.C. has made a disgraceful botch of administering Covid vaccines, and it's past time to take notice of that failure.