

San Francisco Chronicle

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# Why restaurants requiring vaccination proof could be key to increasing Bay Area vaccination rates

A Stanford infectious disease health expert writes about why he thinks this could be a "carrot-stick" method that would work

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Gozu, seen here in 2019, is one of a handful of S.F. restaurants and bars requiring proof of vaccination for entry.

Carlos Avila Gonzalez/The Chronicle

Earlier this month, French President Emmanuel Macron announced a new policy requiring proof of vaccination or a recent negative COVID-19 test for entering venues like restaurants and bars, and it had astonishing results: Within a day, over 2% of the unvaccinated population signed up to get shots, representing nearly 1 million people. That number has quickly climbed to over 2 million. The threat of missing out on croissants and cappuccinos seemed to be enough to convince the vaccine-hesitant.

France's new rule also applies to some other places: trains, planes, concert halls and iconic spots such as the Louvre Museum and Eiffel Tower, for instance. And though thousands protested the move in France, Italy followed suit on Thursday and instituted a similar requirement.

In the Bay Area, the possibility of having such a rule in bars and restaurants is extremely compelling. We are obsessed with food and blessed with diverse culinary opportunities and fresh ingredients. Unfortunately, restaurants are among the few places where removing a mask is unavoidable, and indoor dining is known to be an activity where COVID-19 can spread. What if we took the step of requiring a vaccination passport to get into restaurants, too? Would that be enough to raise our vaccination rate in the face of the contagious delta variant?

The concept is already under consideration. One San Francisco bar group, which represents 500 bars, is thinking about requiring vaccine proof for clientele. And the S.F. Chamber of Commerce is informally polling its members about a similar program. But whether such a rule is mandated by the government or by entrepreneurs, as someone who studies infectious diseases, I think this could be the key to quickly boosting the vaccination rate.

Many people think that motivations come in two forms — the carrot and the stick. The vaccine passport scenario is more like a carrot/stick. In this *crudités* approach, unvaccinated individuals would be denied privileges that they took for granted in the pre-COVID era and that were completely denied to everyone in the lockdown era. The carrot, of course, would be the right to enter treasured venues.

For vaccinated individuals, patronizing restaurants where everyone is vaccinated can have additional health and psychological benefits, by greatly decreasing the risk of breakthrough infections.

Compared with historical precedents, the two-dose SARS-CoV-2 vaccines are remarkably effective — they confer around 95% protection against symptomatic disease. However, that means that approximately 1 in 20 vaccinated individuals who are exposed to a contagious person in a crowded restaurant may get sick. Vaccinated individuals are not invulnerable. A great deal of additional protection is provided by avoiding exposure to individuals who may be contagious and by wearing masks.

## Coronavirus Coverage

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We can also speculate on the positive economic impact of such a policy. Because of the decreased risk, more vaccinated people — like me — will be motivated to go out to eat, particularly those who are risk-averse. Although this policy would exclude a segment of the population, the majority of Bay Area residents are already vaccinated, and these individuals may be more likely to patronize such places. This strategy would also eliminate the negative publicity and lost business from needing to close due to an outbreak on-site. Despite high vaccination rates, some restaurants have had to temporarily shut down recently because of positive COVID-19 tests among staff.

One issue: how such a rule would be mandated. Despite strong support for universal vaccination from President Joe Biden, Gov. Gavin Newsom and local public health officers, the path to implementing such a plan is more than a little hazy. It seems likely that anti-vax, anti-science segments will raise concerns about autonomy and threaten legal recourse. Though the majority of French people support the new measures there, many people have also protested the requirements.

In the absence of public vaccination mandates, individual businesses might be persuaded to adopt a vaccinated-only policy. It could even be used as an advertising ploy. It would certainly provide ample incentive for me. I know I'm not alone: After news broke that some San Francisco bars were considering vaccine requirements, many people professed on social media that such a rule would make them feel better about being out in public, too.

The core purpose of such a rule, though, would be improving overall public health. As of Thursday, 76% of eligible San Francisco residents had been fully vaccinated. But the highly contagious delta variant is quickly rising in prevalence, increasing the risk for everyone, including those who are already vaccinated.

## Coronavirus Resources

Live updates: [Real-time news from around the Bay Area](#)

How to find and schedule [a COVID vaccine appointment](#)

COVID-19 Map: [Data on trends in the Bay Area and across California](#)

Quiz: How well do you understand COVID-19 rates in your area?

Vaccine Tracker: The latest developments

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Being vaccinated prevents serious illness to the individual and offers community protection to friends and family, especially those who can't be vaccinated, such as children, or the immunocompromised, who may not be well-protected by vaccination. And it benefits the world at large. Reducing the overall prevalence of infection decreases the further spread of the virus and the emergence of additional variants.

As in France, anyone willing to give up their right to eat out or to frequent stores or events may retain their right to remaining unvaccinated. But many others may be enticed to join the growing ranks of the vaccinated and enjoy the many health, economic and psychological privileges that vaccination confers.

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## First Person

This is First Person, where members of the Bay Area community voice their perspectives on food topics. Robert Siegel is a professor of microbiology and immunology at Stanford University who studies infectious diseases.