

Learning from Rapid Data to Inform Policy on COVID-19 in Zambia

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Innovations for Poverty Action

Tracking how people's lives are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic enables policymakers to assess the situation in their countries and make data-driven policy decisions. To respond to this need, Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) implemented the Research for Effective COVID-19 Responses (RECOVR) panel survey in Zambia to facilitate comparisons, document real-time trends of policy concern, and inform decision-makers about the communities that are hardest-hit by the economic toll of the pandemic. IPA conducted the RECOVR survey from June 15-July 6, 2020 (Round 1) and November 28-December 21, 2020 (Round 2). The surveyors employed a random digit dialing to obtain a nationally representative sample of mobile phone numbers. The survey rounds document varied adherence to disease prevention measures, as well as severe negative shocks to employment, income and food security. This abstract focuses on the results from the health and COVID-19 mitigation survey modules and identifies areas for future engagement.

Overall, respondents are largely aware of COVID-19 risks but seem to be heeding only certain self-protection measures, though such behaviors and perceptions are by no means uniform. The proportion of respondents who say they feel their household is at risk of contracting COVID-19 increased by 10pp, from 37 percent to 47 percent. At the same time, the proportion of respondents that indicate going outside the home every day in Round 2 increased by 41 percentage points (pp) from 16 percent to 57 percent. The survey also indicates that the proportion of respondents reporting usage of homemade facemasks decreased by 16pp, while the proportion using medical facemasks increased by 10pp, indicating a change in the types of facemasks respondents report using.

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Encouragingly, 75 percent of respondents said they would take a COVID-19 vaccine once it is available, and 76 percent similarly would vaccinate their children, with no significant differences by socioeconomic status or gender. Respondents cite self-protection as the most important reason for getting the vaccine. Nevertheless, less than half of respondents strongly agree that the vaccine is safe (44 percent) and effective (45 percent), suggesting that continued public health messaging around vaccine information is critical. Sixty five percent of respondents indicate that they trust doctors and healthcare professionals for vaccine information, suggesting that the Ministry of Health is well-positioned for public health messaging around future immunization campaigns.

With the above results in mind, the Ministry of Health and other partners should continue to promote and enhance clear and actionable health messages on COVID-19 prevention. The Ministry should also incorporate such messaging and information awareness for eventual immunization campaigns. Finally, results from the survey also indicate that the pandemic has increased financial stress of households, including effects on food security (e.g. amount of food consumed), which, for households with school-aged children can threaten children's nutrition and development. Therefore, in addition to the efforts that the Ministry of Health is taking in dealing with COVID-19, the Government of Zambia should consider strengthening existing multisectoral approaches to ensure that financial needs for the most vulnerable households are met. Additionally, Cash transfers which Zambia is already rolling out boost food security and can also be leveraged to increase uptake of preventive behaviors.