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White House frustrated with 'hyperbolic' and 'irresponsible' Delta variant coverage, sources say

By [Oliver Darcy](#), CNN Business

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New York (CNN) – A version of this article first appeared in the "Reliable Sources" newsletter. [You can sign up for free right here.](#)

The White House is frustrated with what it views as alarmist, and in some instances flat-out misleading, news coverage about the Delta variant. That's according to two senior Biden administration officials I spoke with Friday, both of whom requested anonymity to candidly offer their opinion on coverage of [the CDC data released](#) that suggests vaccinated Americans who become infected with the Delta coronavirus variant can infect others as easily as those who are unvaccinated.

At the heart of the matter is the news media's focus on breakthrough infections, which the CDC has said are rare. In some instances, poorly framed headlines and cable news chyrons wrongly suggested that vaccinated Americans are just as likely to spread the disease as unvaccinated Americans. But that isn't quite the case. Vaccinated Americans still have a far lower chance of becoming infected with the coronavirus and, thus, they are responsible for far less spread of the disease.

"The media's coverage doesn't match the moment," one of the Biden officials told me. "It has been hyperbolic and frankly irresponsible in a way that hardens vaccine hesitancy. The biggest problem we have is unvaccinated people getting and spreading the virus."

As the Biden officials explained to me, the administration is worried that the media's focus on these instances of breakthrough infections might lead to people being more hesitant to get a vaccine. Think about it: If you're a young person, and already believe you will be OK if you do get infected, why would you now get a vaccine, given that coverage suggests you can still just as easily become infected and spread the virus after receiving a shot?

The worry about this line of messaging from major media sources worried officials so much, I'm told, that they reached out to several major news organizations with the aim of getting them to dial back the coverage...

"YOU'RE DOING IT WRONG"

Unfortunately, in some cases, those outreach efforts might have occurred too late. The New York Times, for instance, [tweeted](#) early Friday morning, "The Delta variant is as contagious as chickenpox and may be spread by vaccinated people as easily as the unvaccinated, an internal C.D.C. report said." Ben Wakana, a member of the White House's rapid response team, responded bluntly: "VACCINATED PEOPLE DO NOT TRANSMIT THE VIRUS AT THE SAME RATE AS UNVACCINATED PEOPLE AND IF YOU FAIL TO INCLUDE THAT CONTEXT YOU'RE DOING IT WRONG." The Times ultimately added more context to its tweet in a [follow-up](#).

But it wasn't just The Times. The Washington Post [ran a headline](#) that read, "CDC study shows three-fourths of people infected in Massachusetts covid-19 outbreak were vaccinated." As Matthew Gertz [commented](#), "Please don't do this. Provincetown has one of the highest vaccination rates in the country. As vaccination rates increase the percentage of cases that are in vaccinated people NECESSARILY increases." The Post's headline was later updated to note that in the outbreak "few required hospitalization."



per NBC's own data, that figure represented less than .08 percent of the 164.2 million-plus people fully vaccinated since January." NBC updated its headline later to read, "Breakthrough Covid cases: Data shows how many vaccinated Americans have tested positive."

The focus should be on the unvaccinated

I reached out to Dr. Jonathan Reiner, a CNN medical analyst and professor at George Washington University's medical school, to get his thoughts on Friday's coverage. Reiner told me that he believed that the focus on breakthrough infections among the vaccinated "has been a little hysterical." He explained, "The vaccines still work remarkably well in terms of preventing serious illness and death. We're seeing that the risk of death for a vaccinated person in this country is 25X lower than for unvaccinated. If you look at the P-Town outbreak there were no deaths. So let's all take a deep breath..."

News orgs aren't the only ones to blame

I also called up Dr. Leana Wen, a CNN medical analyst and former Baltimore health commissioner, who agreed that the media is "missing the big picture, but so is the CDC." Wen explained that the CDC said it was changing its mask guidance because of the new data regarding rare instances in which a vaccinated person becomes infected and can then spread the virus. "They got it wrong," she said. "The reason why the guidance is changing is that Covid-19 is spreading really quickly, Delta is a big problem, and the reason for the spread is because of the unvaccinated." Wen said the primary reason the CDC needed to change its mask guidance is because the honor system wasn't working. In other words, people who were not vaccinated were acting as if they were and not wearing masks or following other basic safety protocols...

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