

Novel Method of Engaging with Vulnerable, Settled Communities During COVID-19

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Abstract

Aims

Ongoing high COVID-19 incidence rates within settled vulnerable populations in the Midlands of Ireland required a novel, non-discriminatory model of engagement.

Methods

A collaboration of HSE Midland's Department of Public Health, Safetynet Primary Care and the HSE Midlands Traveller Health Unit trialled six pop-up COVID-19 testing sites throughout March/April 2021, targeting settled vulnerable communities with high local incidence rates. Public Health doctors provided information, reassurance and advice on-site, with members of the Traveller Health Unit and Primary Health Care Projects providing Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) supplies.

Results

576 COVID-19 tests were performed, from which two positive cases identified, 42 members of vulnerable populations were identified, 221 health promotion videos were sent and 448 IPC packs were distributed.

Conclusion

While the effectiveness of the process to identify positive COVID-19 cases was limited, it offered a unique opportunity for Public Health Medicine to engage with settled vulnerable populations and build a relationship of trust.

Introduction

The Midlands of Ireland have seen a disproportionately high incidence of COVID-19 recently when compared to the rest of the country¹. In early March 2021, Offaly and Longford had the highest and second highest incidence rates nationally². Furthermore, between December 10th 2020 and March 18th 2021, 44 outbreaks (with an associated 527 cases) within Traveller communities in the Midlands were notified to the Department of Public Health Medicine³.

Irish Travellers have been burdened significantly by such outbreaks when compared to other vulnerable groups. Nationally, between March 1st 2020 and September 25th 2021, there were 481 outbreaks amongst Irish Travellers, compared to 95 Direct Provision outbreaks, 56 Homeless outbreaks and 40 Roma outbreaks⁴. Travellers also have a higher risk of both infection and severe disease relative to the general population⁵.

A novel method of engaging with these communities, to facilitate testing and to allow for community health promotion, was proposed by the Midlands Department of Public Health, in collaboration with the Traveller Health Unit and Safetynet Primary Care, a medical charity with funding from HSE Social Inclusion. The objectives of this collaboration were; 1) to identify cases in high incidence communities, 2) foster trust and confidence amongst these vulnerable communities in the services provided by the Partnership, thus paving the way for positive engagement in future services such as vaccination, and 3) provide an opportunity for vaccine advocacy.

Methods

The project's aim was to offer testing to populations living in residential areas with high COVID-19 transmission and a high proportion of vulnerable groups, especially Irish Travellers. This would provide an opportunity for health promotion and to provide supplies to assist with health protection in households. A longer-term aim was to pave the way for strong vaccine demand in these vulnerable populations, by growing trust in the service and the partnership.

A pop-up testing site was used to facilitate testing at the chosen locations. These testing sites, held in open and visible outdoor spaces, were supplied/staffed by Safetynet and typically ran for approximately four hours. Anyone who attended was offered a free COVID-19 PCR test with an additional rapid antigen test if symptomatic. The only exception was the testing in Birr which was a trial of primarily antigen testing. Safetynet followed-up results and contacted individuals as required. Ethnic identifiers were acquired from tested individuals. Public Health doctors engaged with all attendees to answer questions and provide advice, with emphasis on methods to prevent COVID-19 transmission within Traveller communities as outlined through the relevant HPSC guidance⁶, including COVID-19 vaccines. All those attending were offered an information video from the HSE on the vaccine, both for the general public^{7,8} and the Traveller community⁹. Finally, individuals received a hygiene pack, with face masks, wipes and hand sanitiser, to aid in infection prevention.

Targeted advertisement, using door to door visits and flyers, was conducted at residential sites the day prior, with special emphasis on reaching the vulnerable population in question.

Results

Between 16/03/2021 and 30/04/2021, six separate sites were chosen based on local incidence rates and presence of a settled, vulnerable population. A table summarising results is presented below.

Table 1: Summary of data from six chosen sites within the Midlands.

	<i>Ardnacassa Estate, Co. Longford</i>	<i>Birr, Co. Offaly</i>	<i>Grange, Mullingar, Co. Westmeath</i>	<i>Edenderry, Co. Offaly</i>	<i>Arden View, Tullamore, Co. Offaly</i>	<i>Portlaoise, Co. Laois</i>
Date:	16/03/2021	26/03/2021	02/04/2021	09/04/2021	23/04/2021	30/04/2021
Residents Tested:	50	238	63	147	43	35
Number of Positive Cases:	1	1	0	0	0	0
Incidence Rate:	2%	0.42%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Number of Vulnerable Population Identified:	22	0	4	8	0	8
Ethnic Breakdown:	x22 White Irish Traveller x10 White Irish x9 Black African x2 White Polish x2 Other White x5 Undocumented	x229 White Irish x4 White Polish x4 Other White x1 Undocumented	x54 White Irish x4 White Irish Traveller x1 White British x4 Undocumented	x130 White Irish x8 Brazilian x3 Polish x6 Other White	x42 White Irish x1 Indian Irish	x21 White Irish x8 White Irish Traveller x4 White European x1 Brazilian x1 South African
Number of COVID-Vaccine Videos Sent:	37	40	32	72	15	25
Number of IPC Packs Distributed:	42	182	51	109	36	28
Public Health Q&A Offered (including vaccine advice)?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Discussion

It was noted that there was limited identification of vulnerable populations on certain sites (namely Birr and Arden View). It is possible that some Travellers in these locations were reluctant to self-identify as such.

Piloting of antigen-only testing proved to be time-consuming and labour-intensive for on-site laboratory staff when compared to PCR testing, and was not repeated in the setting of unpredictable numbers attending. Disproportionally high attendance in Birr was linked to leaking of information on the testing to the broader community on social media 48 hours prior, with more restrained and targeted marketing utilised thereafter.

Of the 576 tests from the six sites, only 2 COVID-19 cases (0.35% incidence rate) were identified. While the number of identified cases was low, it was felt that the true strength of this operation was its ability to engage and encourage healthy behaviour within a vulnerable community. Community feedback on both the events themselves and the follow-up vaccine information videos was largely positive and appreciative.

Whether this has had any impact on incidence rates amongst these vulnerable groups, or the communities in which they live, is questionable. However, we feel the partnership has provided a grass-roots service that our vulnerable communities can trust and have confidence in. We hope this will pave the way for strong vaccine uptake.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interest:

We have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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