

# RESPONSE TO COVID-19 IN BENGAL: A CITIZENS' PERCEPTION SURVEY



## Executive Summary

The Eastern State of West Bengal is seeing the **highest surge of COVID-19 cases in India** at present with the onset of the deadly second wave of the virus. Recent news bulletin has uncovered that every second person in [Kolkata](#) is testing positive (Times of India). With covid cases **doubling every eighth day** in the month of [April](#) (India Today), Bengal, at present is seeing a fast-climbing death rate that spiked by about 22 times since the beginning of April. (Economic Times, 2021)

SwitchON Foundation undertook a rapid assessment to understand the current scenario of the case surge and people's perception of lockdown along with their knowledge on vaccines. Total **804 surveys** were undertaken out of which **521 were from rural areas** and **283 from urban areas**.

**Findings from the Study:** The study revealed **60% of people who responded had a friend or a relative, who has passed away from COVID**. From the survey, it was revealed rural respondents saw better practice of COVID appropriate behavior, willingness to take vaccines, and openness to lockdown. The survey also revealed some ominous findings taking into consideration the current scenario of this unprecedented health chaos that the state has landed into.

### 1. Awareness of COVID-19 vaccines -

- a. A whopping 57% of respondents said that they were concerned about health issues arising after taking the vaccine
- b. 30% from the age group of above 50 years were not in favor of taking a vaccine
- c. 85% of females are willing to take the vaccine as against 79% of males.
- d. 66% of the people from rural areas are still unaware of the registration process for taking the vaccine.

The survey shows most people are concerned about their health and hence are apprehensive about taking the vaccine. Females are more willing to take than males and it is the elderly who are most skeptical in taking the vaccine. The younger generation is more willing to get vaccinated.

### 2. Awareness of preventive measures-

- a. 68% of respondents said that they have noticed more than a quarter population around them don't wear masks properly.
- b. 66% of people in urban areas and 77% in rural areas responded that they do not see 6 feet social distancing norms being followed while traveling or in market places.
- c. About 81% of people in rural areas see more than half of the population around them wearing a mask as against 64% in urban areas.
- d. Only 7% of people owned N-95 masks, while [N-95](#) masks are considered to be the most effective masks in containing the virus spread from respiratory droplets.

The survey shows that while most respondents know about the covid appropriate behavior, approx 70% reported that it was not being strictly followed and implemented - such as wearing a mask properly or maintaining social distancing.

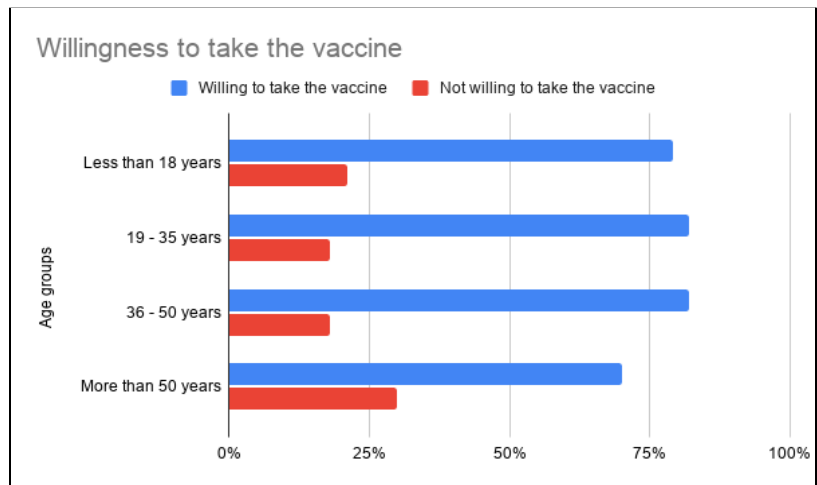
**3. Awareness on Importance of lockdown in the State -**

- a. While 69% of people in rural areas responded in favour of a lockdown only 63% of people in urban areas in the state were in favour of lockdown.
- b. 75% of the people were in favour of a lockdown which is 2 weeks or less.
- c. About 81% of people in rural areas see more than a half of the population around them wearing a mask as against 64% in urban areas.

69% of rural communities are in favor of a lockdown as compared to only 63% in favour of lockdown in urban communities. Even though the virus is fast spreading in urban areas and the first lockdown was most difficult for migrant communities who belong to rural communities.

## 1. Knowledge and awareness on COVID-19 vaccines

While it has been repeatedly championed by several national and international health agencies that COVID-19 vaccines currently surfacing in the nation is safe and the most effective way of staying protected against the virus, there still exists some level of apprehension among people regarding the effectiveness of the vaccine and the side effects after the first jab. Our study revealed that the **highest willingness** to take the vaccine prevails among people of the **middle-aged category** while the highest apprehension was among people above 50 years.



While only 26% of the people surveyed were aware of any person having a serious reaction to taking the vaccine, about 57% of them said that they were concerned about any health issues arising after taking the vaccine.

Table 1: Table showing % of population willing to take the vaccine

Gender	% of people Willing to take the vaccine	% of people not willing to take the vaccine
Male	79%	15%
Female	85%	9%



Covid-19 vaccine roll out (Location: South 24 Parganas).  
Source: IndianExpress,2021

Females are more willing to take the vaccines than males. About **85% of females are more willing to take the vaccine than 79% males**. Among rural and urban areas, 34% and 78% respectively were sure of the registration process in taking the vaccine. Hence, awareness of the registration process which is happening online should be more popularised among the rural areas. The third phase of the vaccination drive has begun from 1st May 2021 and will cover young people above 18 years of age. In the earlier phases, India managed to vaccinate people in the age category of above 50 years.

Reportedly Co-WIN app has seen above [1.23 crore](#) registrations, however, the country still faces a major stock shortage of these vaccines.

## 2. Awareness of preventive measures taken to avoid further spread of the virus

The sudden exacerbation of the situation in a dire second wave of the virus spread in Indian states has left hospitals overflowing with patients and crematorium crowded by mourning families of the deceased. COVID-19 cases have been increasingly seeing the highest spike in deaths since the beginning of April and the situation has only worsened ever since. In Bengal, the situation is no better. Our analysis finds out that amidst the rising spread, there may be no dearth of awareness among several people, but adopting practices by citizens and implementation is a major issue regarding the proper use of masks, using the right kind of masks, and practicing a COVID-19 appropriate behavior.

68% of the population surveyed responded that they see above a quarter population around them who do not **wear masks**. The majority of people only use medical masks or cotton masks, while the **use of N-95 masks has been significantly low at only 7%**. However, the latter is considered to be most effective. Medical and cloth masks can be effective only when double masks are worn while stepping outside.



Awareness drive and distribution of masks conducted by SwitchON Foundation Team

The survey showed that awareness of COVID-19 appropriate behavior like 6 feet social distancing and self-isolation was the highest amongst people dwelling in urban areas as against rural areas, but implementation was very low.

Table 2: Table showing % of people following 6 feet of social distancing

Maintenance of 6-feet social distancing and Practice of wearing mask properly	City (urban areas)		Villages/ semi towns (rural and peri-urban areas)	
		% of people seeing 6 feet social distancing being maintained		% of people seeing 6 feet social distancing being maintained
Yes		34%		23%
No		66%		77%

**Table 3: Table showing % of people seen wearing a mask by the respondents**

<b>% of people seen wearing a mask</b>	<b>% of respondents</b>
less than 25% of people wear masks	8%
25-50% wear masks	16%
50-75% wear masks	44%
above 75% wear masks	31%

**Table 4: Table showing % of people seen wearing a mask in urban & rural areas**

<b>% of people seen wearing a mask</b>	<b>City (Urban areas)</b>	<b>Villages/ semi towns ( rural and peri-urban areas)</b>
more than 50%	64%	81%
less than 50%	36%	18%

More people in villages have responded that they have seen over half of the population around them wearing a mask. This is interestingly higher than that of urban areas. About 81% of people in rural areas see more than half of the population around them wearing a mask as against 64% in urban areas. Additionally, about **87% of the population in rural areas know about self-isolation** while showing symptoms that are lower than that of urban areas. This indicates that the fear of the disease spread still prevails in rural spaces while it has somewhat subsided in urban spaces. In the latter, people have started taking it more casually.

### 3. The Acceptance of lockdown given the current situation of West Bengal

After the reopening of the state from the 2020 lockdown, demand for the 2021 lockdown arises amongst the citizens of West Bengal given the current rise of death rate. A total of 63% of people in urban areas and 70% of people in rural areas voted for a lockdown given the present situation of the state. More rural people are willing to go through a lockdown as compared to people in urban areas. However, it is the urban areas that are seeing the highest surge in cases.

Our analysis showed that almost 40-60% of the population spent about 8-12 hours outside their house in a day due to employment purposes. This makes the inception of a complete lockdown and for a long period of time would be difficult for the State as it would come as a huge blow to the State's economy.

75% of the population vouched for an up to two-week lockdown. On 30th April, the State had already declared for a partial lockdown bringing restrictions on the operations of restaurants, gyms, movie halls, schools, and colleges and allotted specific times for other operations in an attempt to contain the spread.

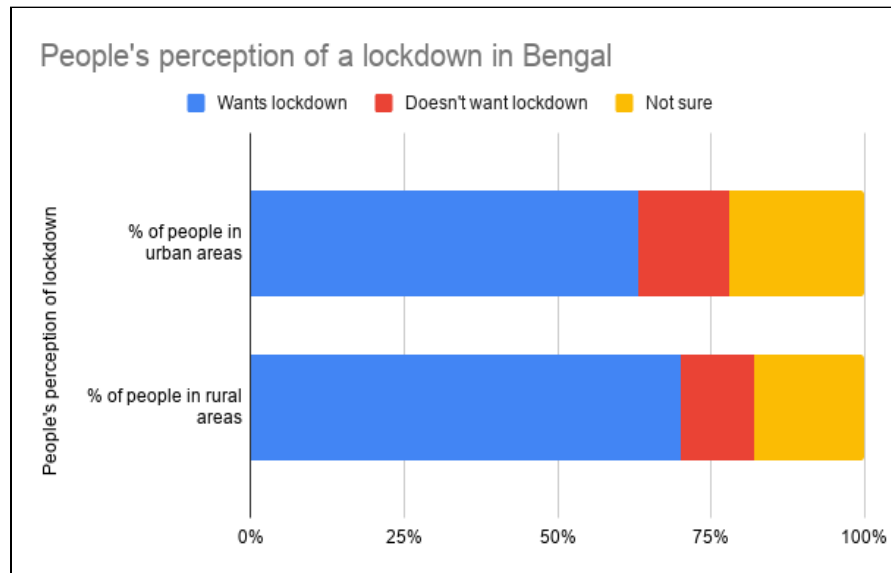


Table 5: Table showing perception on lockdown duration

Period of lockdown required	Rural areas (% of the population)	Urban areas (% of the population)
Up to one week	32%	20%
2 weeks	53%	40%
More than 3 weeks	15%	40%

As expected, more people in rural areas want a short lockdown of up to 2 weeks than people in urban areas. 40% of people in urban areas want more than a 3-week lockdown as against 15% in rural areas.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The present surge in cases of COVID-19 has presented before us an unprecedented health crisis that has compromised the State's health infrastructure like never before. As the State machinery gears up to accelerate its vaccination programme and help people better tackle the virus spread within the State, it is important to take into consideration the fact that the COVID-19 appropriate behaviour is the key to stay protected as the situation of uncertainty and despair looms large. Certain key recommendations that we wish to provide from our study findings are :

- **Spread awareness on vaccination:** Awareness on how to register for the vaccine should be done especially in rural and peri-urban areas. There is also a need to spread awareness on the importance of taking these vaccines not just for the safety of themselves but also for the safety of their families as can be seen in the UK, US and [New Zealand](#).  
To know more about how to register for vaccines, read here - <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/coronavirus-vaccination-registration-cowin-aarogya-setu-app-7292212/>
- **Strict implementation of COVID-19 appropriate behaviour:** Given the current situation, the virus is evolving and its continuous mutations are making it more contagious. Hence, local authorities must ensure [COVID-19 appropriate behaviour](#) (like social distancing, wearing masks etc) is strictly implemented across all places. Strict fines and penalties should be imposed. To know about double masking, find information here - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CDmWjyvOmWA>
- **Not all COVID-19 cases are serious:** In case of mild symptoms, isolation and home care has proved to be effective in defeating the virus and awareness must be spread on how to treat covid at home and properly isolate so that others at home and surrounding don't get affected.  
To know how to treat COVID-19 at home, read on <https://swachhindia.ndtv.com/how-to-treat-covid-19-patients-at-home-here-is-what-doctors-recommend-58535/>
- **Need to detect COVID-19 early :** RT-PCR tests in Bengal is one of the [lowest](#) in the country as per population and more as early detection will help in saving lives.
- **Setup Isolation centres across the state – Break the chain :** The present need of the hour is to create more number of isolation centres and safe homes across the State as our hospital facilities are overflowing and working beyond capacities. [Isolation](#) has proved to be the most effective way of ceasing the contagion.



## **Annexure**

### Respondents Place of Residence

<b>Location</b>	<b>% of respondents</b>
Urban areas (cities)	35%
Rural areas (peri-urban areas and semi towns)	65%

### Respondents age and gender

<b>Age</b>	<b>% of respondents</b>
Less than 18 years old	6%
18-35 years old	71%
36- 50 years old	15%
More than 50 years old	7%

<b>Gender</b>	<b>% of respondents</b>
Female	40%
Male	60%

### Respondents room availability status

<b>No. of rooms in the house</b>	<b>% of respondents</b>
1-2 rooms	26%
2-4 rooms	55%
More than 4 rooms	17%



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