

# CIA's hunt for Osama bin Laden fuelled vaccine hesitancy in Pakistan

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A child receives a polio vaccine in Peshawar, Pakistan, on 12 January  
Saeed Ahmad/Xinhua/Alamy Live News

The CIA's efforts to capture [Osama bin Laden](#) via a fake vaccination drive in Pakistan led to a rise in vaccine hesitancy in the years after the scheme was revealed.

In 2011, it was reported that the CIA had organised a [fake vaccination drive in Abbottabad, Pakistan](#), reportedly administering hepatitis B vaccines to babies, while obtaining DNA samples to compare with that of bin Laden's sister, who died in the US the year before. The CIA was attempting to find a child who was related to bin Laden, in an effort to pin down his whereabouts.

These reports led to uproar in Pakistan and a number of anti-vaccine campaigns were started by Islamic extremist parties. [Monica Martinez-Bravo](#) at the Centre for Monetary and Financial Studies in Madrid, Spain, and her colleague [Andreas Stegmann](#) at the University of Warwick, UK, have investigated the effect this had on vaccine uptake.

They collected data from the Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement survey on 18,795 children born between January 2010 and July 2012 across 115 districts of the country. The records showed whether a newborn had received their diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis (DTP), polio, and measles vaccines.

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The pair then compared these records to the political stance of each district as measured by the 2008 Pakistani general election, the most recent one before the reports on the fake vaccination drive. They found a 23 per cent decline in DTP vaccination rates in districts with more support for Islamic extremism, along with a 28 per cent and 39 per cent decline for polio and measles, compared with districts with lower levels of such electoral support.

“Parents in those districts are probably more exposed to the anti-vaccine propaganda campaigns advertised by the extremist parties,” says Martinez-Bravo. The pair also found a greater decrease in vaccination rates among girls compared with boys, on average 3 percentage points larger. This is most likely to be due to a rumour spread by the Pakistani Taliban that vaccines were made to sterilise young girls, she says.

The researchers also investigated whether the decrease in vaccination led to a rise in disease prevalence. Districts where there was greater support for Islamic extremism had 1.66 more cases of polio on average compared with districts with lower levels of support – almost twice the average number of cases per district.

The vaccine hesitancy appears to be short-lived, according to preliminary data. “More optimistically, these effects seem to diminish for children born around two years after the event,” says Martinez-Bravo.

“This has important lessons for today’s fight against covid-19 in rich and poor countries alike, where concerns over misinformation and anti-vaccine sentiments remain relevant,” says Imran Rasul at University College London.

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