

# Holes in reporting of breakthrough Covid cases hamper CDC response

The agency originally tried to track all infections in vaccinated people, from mild to severe. But in May it decided to focus on the most severe cases.

“Nothing has changed since the pandemic began,” one senior Biden health official said. “We’re still dealing with this patchwork system — and it continues to fail us.”

Of particular concern for health officials now is how rapidly the Delta variant spreads, whether it is reducing the effectiveness of vaccines and whether it causes more severe disease.



A medical assistant applies a bandage after administering a Covid-19 vaccination dose. | Mario Tama/Getty Images

A senior CDC official told POLITICO the state health department reporting system is one of several tools the agency uses to analyze breakthrough infections. The CDC receives hospitalization data in several other ways, including from established networks that draw from specific health care facilities. It is conducting targeted studies on vaccine efficacy among frontline health care workers as well as residents of New York and Los Angeles, [releasing its second slate of findings](#) on Tuesday.

But the majority of the data on breakthrough infections is coming through state health departments via hospitals. Every week or two, the CDC updates its statistics on breakthrough infections and deaths among those who have been hospitalized.

State health officials said when they are able to study the data hospitals report to them, they often find errors such as individuals with the wrong gender or age as well as missing information about vaccination status, including what type of shot the individual received and whether they have been fully vaccinated. There is also a significant lag — sometimes more than two weeks — in reporting from states to the CDC because the hospital electronic systems do not automatically track breakthrough infections. Physicians must do it manually.

To complement data on hospitalized cases from the 50-state reporting network, the CDC is conducting a smaller study with a subset of states to examine all of their breakthrough infections, including mild cases that don't send people to the hospital. The states participating in this smaller study have the ability to match lab reports with immunization records, but they don't maintain their own databases of hospitalization data. They collect that information from hospitals and pass it on to the CDC.