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Wise use of COVID stats: you need not forsake all hope

By Steve Bakke  October 14, 2020



A wise old man should make wise decisions

Our instruction manual for combatting COVID-19 started with blank pages. We've slowly filled them with notes and studies, and gradually applied them to rules of practical living, along with government recommended standard practices. But those "notes" are in pencil, with many erasures and cross-outs.

It seems I've been buried in statistics lately as I try to understand the status and characteristics of many things happening during this pandemic. Here are two sets of observed data that have interesting implications as we decide how they should be interpreted and how they should be used.

Let's be smart about opening schools. We've learned conclusively that this virus holds only minor consequences for school-age children. Using CDC statistics for the period February 1 through September 26, for Americans under age 18, there were 95 deaths from COVID-19, 325 from pneumonia, and 123 from influenza. Comparing that to citizens age 65 through 84 for the same diseases, deaths approximated 93,000, 98,000, and 3,000, respectively. Those comparisons speak loudly to us as we struggle to set the right priorities. For me, this should lead us to prudently normalize the school setting as soon and as thoroughly as possible.

In contrast, as of now we know far less about how contagious these youth might be. They are personally largely unaffected, but we're still learning about how likely they are to spread the virus. Early reports about how readily these young people spread COVID are encouraging, but as yet they are inconclusive. We should therefore focus attention on those with whom students have contact, specifically those we know are more seriously affected by COVID. Older teachers and older family members should be the focus of protective measures, including but not limited to regular testing of students and those with whom they are in contact.

If we summarily shut down schools, we're inviting all the emotional and social "collateral damage" into our lives which come from interrupting educational interaction by our youth. We tend to look for perfect solutions, but there are only trade-offs. That much we should have learned by now. Students must be prudently permitted to get on with their educations.

Spinning survival statistics can affect our peace of mind. I've been reviewing recent CDC statistics to learn about surviving in this world heavily burdened by personal pandemic emotion. My emotional concern focuses on my age range which is a few years beyond traditional retirement age.

Consider this ominous presentation of COVID-19 **DEATH RATES** for infected individuals: 0-19 years - .003%; 20-49 years - .02%; 50-69 years - .5%; 70+ years - 5.4%. Using this data, the death rate for people in my age range, the oldest shown, is almost 180,000% higher than for people under 20. Ouch! I say. That type of presentation tends to lead someone to forsake all hope.

But turn that around and look at another, more relevant presentation of the same data, but in a format that compares COVID-19 **SURVIVAL RATES** for infected individuals: 0-19 years - 99.997%; 20-49 years - 99.98%; 50-69 years - 99.5%; 70+ years - 94.6%. Wow! I say, feeling a lot better. All ranges have percentage survival rates in the mid to high 90s. The youngest range is better off than I am for sure, but my range's survival rate is almost 95% of those under 20. That's a more valid comparison, and I like it better.

The second analysis shows us the actual reality that positive outcomes overwhelm the likelihood of something bad happening. We don't get the same message from the first comparison. How could both analyses be telling the same story? That's my point, they don't tell the same story. One is very misleading.

The information used for both presentations is the same, but the comparison of survival rates gives us more valid and useful information. And as a bonus, it puts older citizens in a better frame of mind. This shows the power of spinning and presentation. Keep that in mind when eternal pessimists try to play with your pandemic emotions. Remember, the situation probably isn't as bad as doomsayers want you to believe. You need not forsake all hope.