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Pandemic recovery and difficult decisions: but look beyond your front door

By Steve Bakke  September 6, 2020



Recovering from and restarting individual lives and the country after a pandemic is hard work. There's no instruction manual and it's complicated by the fact that every issue seems to occur at the intersection of both health and economic concerns. And we've experienced some of the hazards of getting the economy running again. Infection "hot spots" develop and the fingers of blame start pointing. I support the Administration's declaration that the economy can't be shut down again, but no matter where one stands on that issue, we can agree that the decision is tremendously difficult with far reaching consequences.

The lockdown and the economy have become inseparable issues. Decisions must be made simultaneously about them both, and we should remember our decisions affect others as well as ourselves. Reopening our economy will affect the lives and life spans, separate from the direct effects of COVID-19, both here and around the globe.

In this broader context, the familiar plea "just follow the science" is an overly simplified instruction. There are lots of issues to be considered, and scientists and modelers can't provide solutions for them all. In the real world our leaders, as well as we as individuals, have to strike a balance between competing priorities, national and international.

The title for this article raised this challenge: "look beyond your front door." Everyone must look beyond our personal situation. Wise decisions require that we consider legitimate issues and priorities of others. We must think beyond both our personal and local realities and even national borders. Unless we do that, it's fair to second-guess our decisions.

Pushing to open the economy doesn't indicate willingness to sacrifice health and lives to create profits. Rather, it means we refuse to ignore the real needs of different groups in our country, and citizens of other nations as well.

Many of us have trouble accepting the fact that mitigation efforts, especially shutting down the economy, also produce health and wellness issues, even "body counts." A rise in unemployment

increases suicides, homicides, domestic violence, substance abuse and eating disorders. And that's not just guesswork. Consider the following:

- A 2012 study by Kelly Holland at St. Catherine University found that for every 1% rise in unemployment, deaths from heart disease, cirrhosis of the liver, and stress-related disorders increase 1.9%.
- A 2015 study (see Ajimotokin, Haskins, and Wade, at academia.edu) found that a 1% increase in unemployment rate will increase the violent crime rate by 14.3 incidents per 100,000 inhabitants.
- Recent calls to mental health hotlines are reported to be up by 900%.
- Orlando Health conducted a national survey in August and found that even though parents believe in vaccinations for children, approximately two-thirds have been reluctant to bring their children in for treatment, and recent vaccination statistics confirm a slowdown. Measles is a major concern.
- According to a July CDC report, during June, adults considering suicide more than doubled from 2019 levels.
- Nationwide alcohol sales climbed 26% between March and June compared to last year, according to Nielson Corp. Alcoholism is expected to increase as a result.
- Unexpected deaths such as suicide, homicide, car accidents, and unattended diseases is up because of the pandemic.
- Finally, what's the unmeasured cost of delaying elective medical care like cancer screenings, knee replacements, annual checkups, and glaucoma tests?

Finally, as we peek out our front doors, let's not forget about other economies around the globe. In April, the United Nations World Food Programme WFP's director stated: "More people could potentially die from the economic impact of COVID-19 than from the virus itself." More recent information from the United Nations states that, on a worst case basis, 10% of the world's population won't have enough to eat this year. That's a shame considering we're experiencing an enormous global food surplus. A damaged U.S. food supply chain, caused by restricting the economy once again, would add to the worldwide starvation and death.

I wonder what will be the sustaining memory from 2020 – pandemic, economy shutdown, virtual education, riots, impeachment or presidential election. What I do know is that experiencing this tortuous year will help us better understand what economist Thomas Sowell meant by: "There are no perfect solutions, only tradeoffs."