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Should We Lift the Shutdowns?

Wisconsin's Governor Tony Evers initially imposed his stay-at-home order on March 25, until April 24, then extended it until May 26. Despite the coronavirus largely being a problem in small areas of the state, he continued a blanket shutdown of "nonessential businesses" across the entire state. No scientific rationale has been given for his decision.

Even though reports have already come through of shutdown-related suicide and small-business owners struggling to not lose their hard-earned businesses, the governor, like others, has not relented.



As to hardship, at a cheesecake store in Green Bay, Wisconsin, the owner has been manning the business nearly without help to the point of exhaustion, because she can't afford to pay her employees, desperately hoping the drive-through traffic will be enough to keep her business afloat. The extension meant keeping this workload up for another month.

So should shutdowns such as Wisconsin's continue? No. Why?

First, the shutdowns aren't doing much in terms of what they specifically were begun to do — keep hospitals from being overwhelmed by coronavirus patients. While a few hospitals in New York and elsewhere have been filled to capacity, most hospitals across the nation are mobilized for action — and patiently waiting for virus-laden patients, even as patients with chronic illnesses, such as heart disease, are refused appointments with their doctors (many of these patients will suffer long-term injury or death). Abiding by the rationale for the imposition of the shutdowns, we can conclude, "If hospital resources are not stressed, shutdowns should not happen."

Note, too, that there are three ways to deal with the coronavirus: Find a vaccine to prevent it, find a treatment to cure it, or let the disease run its course so that enough Americans are exposed to the virus (and recover) that the disease is essentially stopped from spreading by acquired immunity. With a vaccine said by experts to be at least a year away, and treatments for the virus so far only helping portions of those affected, our only real option is to let the disease run its course.

Since shutdowns are intended only to slow the rate that people catch the disease, not stop it altogether, with few exceptions the shutdowns are not going to reduce total lives lost. The shutdowns will only prolong the agony — while endangering the country as a whole with economic destruction.

What will the shutdowns do? According to an interview with Harvard infectious disease epidemiologist Marc Lipsitch by wired.com entitled "The Mathematics of Predicting the Course of the Coronavirus," his team expects that the virus' spread will likely continue until the year 2022, unless a treatment or vaccine is found earlier. And during this time period, we will need "massive testing and quarantines of the ill, and aggressive social distancing."



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This is the plan despite the fact that there is no chance that Americans will actually practice rigorous social distancing for up to two years, considering that it would mean stopping classes, sports, family get-togethers, and unmarried sex.

As economist Walter Williams noted, decisions should be based on cost-benefit analyses. For instance, if the country reduced road speeds to five mph, we could likely stop 40,000 traffic deaths each year (benefit), but we don't do this because of the consequences (cost).

If Americans keep the shutdowns going, the economy will be devastated, and it may take many years to get going, causing untold hardship and suffering for millions of Americans. On the other hand, if we allow the virus to spread among the young and healthy through such methods as opening schools, while keeping vulnerable populations (the elderly, the obese, and the immunocompromised) "safe-at-home," it's likely that total coronavirus deaths will be the same or less than if we spread out exposure over a longer period of time.

Getting the scourge over quickly is the advice of Knut Wittkowski, the former longtime head of the Department of Biostatistics, Epidemiology, and Research Design at Rockefeller University in New York City. He stated that lifting the shutdowns would cause the Wuhan virus to be "exterminated" in weeks.

A couple of factoids seem to suggest he is correct. First, a diary from the Spanish flu epidemic shows that it hit Seattle in early October 1918, and was mainly done there in early November ("Attempts to control the outbreak were," as historylink.com noted, "largely futile"). Also, studies done in New York, California, Italy, and more indicate that the coronavirus has little or no noticeable effect on most people, so the small percentage who get very sick will be able to get treatment, while country-wide herd immunity is quickly built to stop the disease.

Moreover, the longer the virus circulates in the population, the greater the chance that it will mutate dangerously, causing us to have to do this all over again. So let's get this done already.

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