

Maybe the Experts Were Right About Covid-19 the First Time

They originally wanted herd immunity, realizing lockdowns would incur the disasters we're seeing.

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It's time to confront an awful possibility about the lockdowns in which many of the world's economies now find themselves: The experts might have been right the first time.

"The first time" was not so long ago—February to mid-March—when official opinion on how best to grapple with the new coronavirus pandemic was very different. The distinguishing characteristic was modesty.

The stated goal was not to vanquish the virus but merely to try to control its spread so as not to overwhelm health-care systems. Officials also understood public patience with draconian measures would wear thin quickly and demanded politicians exercise caution when asking the public to take on burdens.

Those opinions now are widely derided, often in insulting terms. Yet subsequent events suggest they're mainly correct. Let's take each in turn.

- *We can't stop the virus, we can only slow it.* This is the biggest fact about the pandemic that remains politically impossible to say. The trouble started in mid-March when "herd immunity," previously the tacit or acknowledged endgame for most of the world, became a toxic phrase. Critics pointed out that allowing the virus to spread in a controlled manner would cost lives. They presented a stark alternative of total lockdown or the disaster of Italian hospitals, with no middle ground.

But if those experts have a more plausible plan than taking a controlled path to herd immunity, the world is waiting to hear it. Experts propose instead either that we await the arrival of a vaccine or that we ramp up testing and contact tracing of the infected. Good luck. A vaccine is a year or more in the future, if one ever emerges. An effective mass test-and-trace regime would require a level of competence and focus that typically eludes modern governments—not to mention an invasion of privacy that, at least in the U.S., might be unconstitutional.

Events will provide two tests of whether the experts were right the first time. Sweden is conspicuous not only for its lack of a formal lockdown but also for its leaders' laser focus on the question of health-system capacity.

Sweden's fans are perhaps too quick to overlook the human tragedy of the resulting higher death toll. But its critics should be more curious about whether, if permanent suppression of the virus is impossible, this approach might stave off subsequent disaster by moderating future peaks of the virus—with fewer of the human costs associated with a lockdown.

We'd better hope Sweden's approach works, because the alternative gives little cause for optimism. We can't lock down our economies waiting for a vaccine that may never arrive. And as Germany, Denmark, Austria and other European countries emerge from their lockdowns, officials all but admit the virus will start spreading again. That's why they are reopening in stages. The virus's second surges in China, Singapore and Hong Kong serve as a warning. The original conventional wisdom acknowledged the reality that draconian lockdowns merely delayed the inevitable spread and that sheltering populations rather than slowly cultivating herd immunity would lead to quickly rising infection rates once countries reopened.

- *We can't ask the public to lock down indefinitely.* This was articulated most forcefully in the U.K., where Prime Minister Boris Johnson took merciless flak for trying to delay the sternest pandemic-mitigation efforts on the grounds that the public would find it hard to comply for long.

Mr. Johnson's critics promptly fell down the rabbit-hole of investigating the scientific basis for that insight within the field of behavioral studies (turns out there isn't a lot) while overlooking its obvious truth in observed human nature. Sustained, severe curtailment of daily liberties has only ever been enforceable at the point of a spear or a gun.

Sure enough, nearly five weeks into Britain's lockdown, its police forces worry the public won't tolerate much more enforcement. Rule-loving Germans comply less and less with social distancing, to judge by a University of Mannheim tracker poll that found that more than 50% of respondents had violated rules against visiting friends at least once in the week ending April 21, up from around 30% in the last week of March. Protests have erupted in the U.S., and near-riots in some of Paris's volatile suburbs.

Leaders are asking us to do the impossible—cut off almost all social contact indefinitely—at often incalculable individual cost, and then belittling those who object as antiscience rubes. At the start of this pandemic some leaders seemingly understood how destructive the resulting loss of trust between rulers and citizenry would be. They abandoned that insight at their, and our, peril.

We've all placed our bets now and can only hope for the best. But it will be well worth it for voters and students of public policy alike to ask in coming years whether policy makers' first instincts were their best—and, if so, why we made it so difficult for them to follow those intuitions.