

Believing Science

One of the hardest types of scientific examination is the “counter-factual.” Economists, most often denied the luxury of “double blind” experiments (where neither the subject, nor the intervenor knows whether the “real drug” is being administered), must ask “what if” questions. In 2020, the major discussion involves “what if” we had locked down earlier? “What if” he hadn’t opened up so soon? “What if” more people wore masks. All of these questions are counterfactuals. They are often fraught with confounding variables, so the answers are not certain. That does not mean, however, that they are not scientific or valid.

Your blogger’s home state of Michigan was smacked early and hard, most probably because of COVID-19 from air travelers from the Far East (Detroit is a Delta Airlines hub). Governor Whitmer, “that woman from Michigan”, imposed severe restrictions on the Michigan economy. After some number of months, it is clear that they succeeded. Michigan’s case numbers have fallen into the middle of the pack. Despite considerable flak from the *Detroit News* and the Republican party, the same *Detroit News* (<https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/politics/2020/09/09/michigan-voters-approve-gretchen-whitmer-handling-pandemic-poll-finds/5750849002/>) reported that 61% of Michigan voters approved of Whitmer’s handling of the coronavirus outbreak compared with 36% who disapprove, according to the poll. Moreover, only 52% of the voters surveyed said they had a favorable impression of Whitmer.

How do we know that her restrictions worked? Look at some places in Michigan where they were lifted. In June, restaurant regulations were loosened and an outbreak traced to an East Lansing restaurant. In September Adrian College announced that 6% of its students and staff had tested positive for COVID-19, with more than 160 active cases on campus at one time. In South Bend, Indiana, no more than a mile or two from the Michigan state line, Notre Dame locked down the student population due to spikes in COVID-19, while continuing to play college football, to crowds limited to 20% of stadium capacity. As of today (September 25, 2020), Notre Dame’s dashboard (<https://here.nd.edu/our-approach/dashboard/>) shows a total of 725 positive cases. After being just behind New York and New Jersey in terms of number of cases and deaths, in April 2020, Michigan has no fallen way back into the pack. It is safe here. People are being careful. People wear masks and social distance ... even in locations such as Macomb County that supported Donald Trump in 2016.

Some continue to disbelieve science. Within the past week:

- While the Israeli government has instituted a second country-wide lockdown, many Orthodox Jews (in Israel and in the United States) view the policy with indifference, if not hostility.

September 25, 2020

- Florida Governor Ron DeSantis announced that restaurants can reopen to full capacity, although local officials may reduce capacity to 50%. If a county wants to restrict restaurant capacity between 50 and 100 percent, it must provide justification to the state. Mr. DeSantis also refused to mandate mask usage in the state, insisting that such a decision should be left up to local governments.
- Arizona's Governor Doug Ducey announced (on September 24) that he would not order businesses to re-close or impose new restrictions when the COVID-19 infection threat in any area returns to "substantial". "Arizona's open," the governor said. "Arizona's economy is open, Arizona's educational institutions are open, Arizona's tourism institutions are open. The expectation is they are going to remain open."
(https://tucson.com/news/local/ducey-says-he-wont-impose-new-restrictions-as-covid-19-threat-is-rising-again/article_c7acec92-0254-53f2-a8ea-2cfe3c86ff6f.html).

Let us look at Arizona's educational institutions. In a dispatch dated September 25, Arizona State University (in Phoenix) reported that its COVID-19 case count has risen to 1,753 students and 31 faculty and staff. University of Arizona (Pima County, or Tucson) reported 2,245 identified COVID-19 cases since Aug. 4. With 35,516 tests performed, U of A had a positivity rate of 6.3% (<https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/arizona-health/2020/09/25/asu-covid-19-case-update-total-1753-students-31-employees/3527870001/>). Pima County and U of A instituted a voluntary, two-week "shelter-in-place" recommendation for the UA campus September 14.

Open, open, ... open. *Sic transit science.*

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