

October 14, 2020

The Great Barrington Mistake

On October 4, 2020, a bunch of “heavy hitters” in the public health world released the [Great Barrington Declaration](#). After a couple of paragraphs of opening, they make the following statement:

The most compassionate approach that balances the risks and benefits of reaching herd immunity, is to allow those who are at minimal risk of death to live their lives normally to build up immunity to the virus through natural infection, while better protecting those who are at highest risk. We call this *Focused Protection* [emphasis added].

They continue:

Those who are not vulnerable should immediately be allowed to resume life as normal. Simple hygiene measures, such as hand washing and staying home when sick should be practiced by everyone to reduce the herd immunity threshold. Schools and universities should be open for in-person teaching. Extracurricular activities, such as sports, should be resumed ... Arts, music, sport and other cultural activities should resume.

There is nothing about masking or social distancing in this Declaration. There is no assumption that we will have a vaccine any time soon. There is no mention of who will teach the children in the schools, and who will conduct the symphony orchestras that will again be playing in front of packed houses. The authors propose models of nursing home staffing that lead one to wonder if any of them has ever been in a nursing home.

“Herd immunity” will save us, say the authors. When enough people have become infected, there won’t be any more people to infect. Simple enough.

Your blogger has spent the last seven months writing about appropriate precautions and re-openings. As an economist, he is quite capable of comparing marginal benefits to marginal costs. He can write down the models and derive the optimal theoretical conditions. Shutting down the economy imposes big marginal costs. It is conceivable that at some levels they would exceed the marginal benefits.

Let us do some simple arithmetic. The generally accepted death toll from the 1918 Spanish flu in the United States was 675,000 out of a population of 103.2 million people, or slightly less than 2/3 of one percent. The Spanish flu ended with herd immunity. It is simplistic, to be sure, but extrapolating the Spanish flu death rate to the current US population of 330 million people would lead to 2.16 million deaths. We are at 220,000 deaths right now. Do the arithmetic.

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YB often invokes the public health benefits of a national 15 MPH speed limit. We would save about 35,000 lives per year, because we don't kill each other (often) in accidents at that speed. All advanced countries have rejected the 15 MPH limit because it is "too costly" in terms of time spent traveling.

To continue with that analogy, since March most countries have turned their speed limits from 75 MPH to 40 MPH, and policy-makers have made their countries "wear their seat belts" (through masks, social distancing, and contact tracing). Maybe 40 MPH isn't the right speed, but neither is 75 MPH, on a slippery road in the middle of an ice storm. The signers speak fondly of herd immunity but the levels of herd immunity needed could come with hundreds of thousands of additional deaths.

It is notable that only one economist's name appears on the list of prominent signers of this declaration. YB often notes that economists are terrible party guests, because they often kill a good argument by asking "what do you mean by that?"

They could have used a few more economists in this group.

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