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The COVID-19 Economics of Community

Your blogger (YB) and his partner took a “road trip” in the past couple of weeks to see their daughter and son-in-law. It was the first flight since January 2020, and the first “vacation” in two years. Traveling is not easy; flying in a plane requires masking, with constant reminders by the airplane crew. Airports are still a little scary, with potential infections from lots of people from lots of places.

During our stay, YB + partner + daughter/son-in-law met family and friends in carefully distanced settings. In a nutshell, people seemed gladder to see us than before. A cousin and her partner noted how “relaxing” it was to be with us. Yet another cousin expressed the same emotion, and meetings with even casual friends seemed to be more cordial than in the past. YB + partner view themselves as “nice people”, and fun to be with, but the genuine affection has suggested more. Getting together in the same room transcends Zoom[®].

This is a health economics blog. Economists have found that “economic men and women” value “communities” or “clubs” of like people highly. It often involves gathering in common places such as houses of worship, health clubs, athletic events, theaters, concerts, or bars. It involves passages such as births, bar mitzvahs, communions, graduations, weddings, and funerals. We have been unable to do this since March 2020, and after a brief (and hopeful) interregnum early this summer (2021), the Delta variant is pushing us toward closing down again. Getting together has gotten more dangerous ... again. People who have made careful travel plans for get-togethers such as weddings, are reassessing their decisions.

So, a public that values community lost it in March 2020. Absence has made it more desirable and valuable. Increased vaccination by community members would lower the risk, lowering the economic “price” of community and allow us to buy more. Doesn’t this seem like a good idea, an economic bargain!

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