

May 14, 2020

Flattening the Curve, and then Watching It Spike

The day before last your blogger drove his wife to the Tampa International Airport to catch a coast-to-coast flight. Encountering more traffic than expected, it was nerve-wracking to get to the drop-off area. Upon arrival, at 4:30 pm, we were the ONLY CAR at the entire Blue Terminal at TIA ... on a Tuesday afternoon. It was like one of those bad “end of the world” movies, although it was not a movie. Although we arrived with only a 50 minute window, she easily went through TSA and got to the gate quickly.

She changed planes in Atlanta, and arrived on the West Coast 5 hours later. “How was it,” I asked her. “It’s hard to wear a mask for 5 hours,” she replied.

So what does this have to do with economics? We have flattened the curve by limiting exposure because people are not flying. It is working ... and we still have over 80,000 (and probably over 100,000) people dead in less than four months. Can anyone imagine what things would have looked like if Tampa International Airport, and Delta Airlines were filled to normal levels of travelers, going all over the country and the world. It would be like injecting a deadly drug directly into a vein. Disease and epidemic everywhere.

Yet Republican politicians and their journalistic henchmen (that’s you, Lee Chatfield, Mike Shirkey, Nolan Finley, and Ingrid Jacques), are encouraging resistance (party affiliation makes little difference as Republican Mike DeWine in Ohio gets the same opprobrium as Democrat Gretchen Whitmer in Michigan). If the demonstrators are carrying loaded rifles ... well they really didn’t mean that. They don’t want people to get hurt, but the people should be able to exercise their First (and apparently also their Second) Amendment rights.

Well ...they didn’t mean airplanes, and they know things are bad in Southeast Michigan, but people at the top of the Mitten have the right to get exposed to COVID-19, just so long as it doesn’t come from the residents from Southeast Michigan who travel there every summer. Michigan residents should depend on the business people to do what is best for them, and us.

The problem with that is that it is not best for them, and certainly not best for us. The virus is an economic externality. We still don’t know who has it, and we don’t know how it is transmitted, and it contains a wallop that that we cannot stop.

Those who want to test whether we are flattening the curve should open the Universities, fill the stadiums (the Big House and Spartan Stadium), and the airplanes. Do it, and it will be like holding a lit firecracker in one’s hand to see what will happen.

Or ... cut out the posturing ... and the loaded rifles.

Allen C. Goodman
Professor of Economics