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Lockdowns Again: Legislating COVID

The *New York Times* reported today that Austria was locking down. Indicating that a “menacing” fourth wave of the coronavirus was enveloping Europe, the *Times* noted that Austria may not be the only European country to impose a nationwide lockdown. Starting Monday, November 22, public life will halt, with people allowed to leave their homes only to go to work or to buy groceries or medicines.

It is not Austria alone. The *Times* reported:

Austria, where 66 percent of the population is fully vaccinated, reported more than 14,000 new cases of the virus within 24 hours on Sunday. Over the past week the Netherlands has been averaging more than 20,000, while Germany has seen roughly double that number.

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/21/world/europe/austria-covid-lockdown-vaccine-mandates.html>)

This is a health economics blog. Your blogger has written a lot in the past twenty months about how COVID-19 is air pollution; the more activity, the more pollution. When the incremental costs of the pollution (infection, illness, and death) exceed the benefits of the activity, governments have difficult decisions to make about imposing lockdowns. Some governments are acting; many others are not.

Michigan’s Governor Whitmer has thrown in the towel (metaphorically speaking). She is leaving decisions up to the localities. Whether they want to lock down, or impose mandates makes little difference. There will be impact nonetheless. The Detroit Schools announced this week that they are shifting to online learning on Fridays in December for mental health relief amid rising COVID-19 cases. Superintendent Nikolai Viti announced districtwide instruction on Dec. 3, Dec. 10, and Dec. 17 (all Fridays) will be shifted to online learning. Later in the week they announced that the district will be closed all Thanksgiving week for “deep cleaning.” (<https://detroit.chalkbeat.org/2021/11/19/22792548/detroit-school-closed-thanksgiving-week-covid-deep-cleaning-dpscd-michigan>). Other local municipalities have been forced to go virtual as well for extended periods this fall.

We have learned in the past twenty months that we cannot “legislate COVID.” The restaurant and entertainment sectors have tanked economically not because of legislative lockdowns, but because customers are reluctant to patronize them. Non-manufacturing businesses have remained remote because of serious blowback from workers who are concerned about crowded offices during a continuing COVID pandemic.

Apple Computer recently pushed back its “return” from early January to early February (<https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/apple-pushes-back-return-office-plan-february->

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[rcna6026](#)), in what will be a “hybrid work plan.” At that time, workers will have been out of the office for almost twenty-three months.

Conventions and group meetings have remained shadows of their former selves because participants do not want to travel or to be exposed to strangers of unknown vaccination status from who knows where. The Allied Social Sciences Association (umbrella organization for Economics meetings), met virtually in January 2021 (originally set for Chicago), and will meet again virtually in January 2022 (rather than the original site, Boston).

COVID-19 deaths in the United States spiked a year ago to 4,000 per day after the travel, entertaining, and other economic activity at the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. We have vaccines now, and there is every reason to believe that the impact will be lessened. Still the lockdowns abroad, and the potential economic impacts here in the United States portend a grimmer end-of-year holiday period than any would have expected with the vaccine roll-out at the beginning of the year.

It bears repeating. We cannot legislate COVID.

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