

April 16, 2021

Trying to Stop a Runaway Train

“Michigan’s third COVID-19 surge is ‘like a runaway train,’” said Dr. Nick Gilpin, Beaumont Health’s medical director of infection prevention and epidemiology in the April 15, 2021 web edition of the [Detroit Free Press](#) reported. Beaumont is beginning to put up modular triage units and tents outside some of its hospitals, using curbside triage units at its Grosse Pointe and Troy hospitals, and a tent outside the Dearborn hospital.

Why Michigan? Why now? Wasn’t the vaccine supposed to stop all of this? Why isn’t Governor Whitmer shutting things down?

About a year ago, we didn’t know much about COVID-19 transmission. Should we open packages? Should we disinfect the newspapers that are delivered to our homes? Should we pick up golf balls at the golf course? We know much more now. COVID-19 is transmitted through droplets that come from other humans. The more contact we have with other humans, the more droplets ... and the higher probability of more COVID-19, especially if those droplets come from people are infected, or who have not been vaccinated. You can look it up! (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/how-covid-spreads.html>).

This is a health economics blog. The most efficient way to achieve a given goal (here, reduction of illness and death) is the cheapest way. Michigan shut down hard twelve months ago, and it was reasonably successful in cutting back the disease losses. Many business people and Republicans felt that the shut down was too hard and too long (i.e. that it cost too much, and was hence inefficient). The Governor weathered a firestorm of political napalm and physical threats. The misogyny directed toward the three women who run Michigan was palpable, and it has not ceased.

Understandably, the Governor is reluctant to shut things down again. If she went too far in 2020, one could argue that she is not going far enough in 2021. Stopping COVID-19 means stopping infectious droplets. Vaccinations will make them less infectious, but herd immunity is still several months away. What is the best way to reduce the infectious droplets? Almost certainly, it is to reduce activity. Your blogger’s home institution shut down all face-to-face instruction this week until April 26, and it may go longer than that.

Finally, it is economically inefficient for people to be stupid. Stop having big parties and infecting other people! Harry Truman supposedly said “It’s a recession when your neighbor loses his job; it’s a depression when you lose your own.” It’s too bad if your neighbor gets COVID-19 and dies – it’s unbearably tragic if it’s your loved one.

Allen C. Goodman
Professor of Economics