

Step 3.9 What are the wider impacts of the pandemic?

Here Professor Martin McKee describes the wider social and economic impacts from COVID-19 in different contexts. As you listen, consider the changes you think we will see – and/or you would like to see – when we eventually emerge from this pandemic.

You'll find the two papers that Prof McKee mentions in his talk in the See Also section. There's also an editorial from the Lancet, entitled "COVID-19: remaking the social contract" provoking thought on the changes we could see in societies following COVID-19.

Audio transcript:

SPEAKER: The COVID pandemic has changed our lives in ways that we could not have imagined. Once busy streets have emptied, bars and restaurants have closed, children are unable to go to school. Today, we'll look at some of the social and economic consequences of the response to COVID and what might be done to minimise their effects on health. After that, we'll look ahead to the time after the pandemic once it has been brought under control, to think about what society might look like and whether we might be able to learn from this experience to make the world a better place.

Let's start by looking at the impact of the responses that have been adopted to the COVID pandemic. Many countries have imposed restrictions on what people can do. These have one objective, to reduce the opportunities for transmission of the virus. They include limits on non-essential travel outside the home, closure of shops and entertainment venues, and bans on mass gatherings.

What I'm going to say draws extensively on an analysis that we have published in the British Medical Journal. I would encourage you to read it, as it expands on the issues that I will be talking about. I want to begin with the economic effects of these restrictions. People who are unable to work risk losing their income, and they face possible unemployment if businesses fail. This is a source of great anxiety for those affected. We know from previous experience, particularly in the global financial crisis of 2008, that loss of income or employment has profound consequences for health, and in particular, for mental health.

There are things that governments can do to reduce these risks, but only if they have the resources and the systems in place that are necessary to respond. Many rich

countries have introduced schemes that provide a basic income for those unable to work. This provides some immediate security, but, as importantly, it provides relief for the businesses in which they work, keeping these jobs open so that they can recover quickly while its restrictions are lifted. Of course, unfortunately, there are many countries where this is not going to be possible.

Another concern is the impact of social isolation. This also has consequences for mental health, particularly for those who live alone, and even more so if they have pre-existing health problems. We now know much more about the health-damaging consequences of loneliness, but we need to think about the practical difficulties that people face, for example, in buying food or getting medicines. Again, there are enormous differences between rich and poor countries. There has been a digital revolution enabling many people who are physically isolated to maintain virtual contact with their friends and families, but sadly, once again, this is not the case in many of the world's poor countries.

A third concern is about family relationships. Unfortunately, not everyone lives in a happy family. We need to think about how we can support victims of domestic abuse who are confined to their homes, unable to escape their abuser. We also need to think about the risks of exploitation of young people who are not in school.

A fourth concern involves health-damaging behaviours. Let's face it, being stuck at home can be very boring, and it is not helped by the cancellation of some of the things that you might be interested in, such as sports events. In these circumstances, there is a real risk that people look for relief in alcohol. Interestingly, it seems that access to illicit drugs has reduced in many countries because of the difficulties faced by suppliers, but perhaps the greatest risk is from problem gambling. We are now understanding much more about how gambling companies exploit vulnerable people, and in some countries, at least, they are likely to see this pandemic as an opportunity.

A fifth concern arises from the disruption of essential services. We've already seen in some countries how health services have stopped many of their routine activities to concentrate on COVID. At the same time, people with other conditions are reluctant to go to hospital for fear of becoming infected. In some countries, the number of people attending hospital with heart attacks has fallen by about half. At least some of the excess deaths being recorded are due to people not seeking care when they need it.

Our sixth concern is disruption to education. Again, the burden falls unequally on different groups and on people living in different countries. Some children will be able to connect with their teachers virtually on the internet, but many will not. Looking ahead, there is a real danger of a lost generation.

Our seventh concern relates to transport. In some ways, this is an area where there may be some good news. The reduction in vehicle traffic in some places has meant that it may be possible to see blue skies for the first time in decades. However, looking ahead, there is a risk that people are fearful of using public transport, instead, turning to cars with consequences for health and the environment.

The eighth concern is the risk of social disorder. Throughout history, pandemics have caused people to look for someone to blame. Sadly, there have been a number of accounts of racist attacks, sometimes encouraged by comments by politicians. It is important to guard against stigmatising groups within society.

Our final concern is about the psychosocial impact of COVID. While it is important that political leaders communicate the risks involved and the progress being made in combating the pandemic, we also need to recognise that this is likely to instil fear and anxiety in many people. This could be a major barrier to returning to normality. It will be a long time before many people are willing to go into crowded places, such as entertainment venues and on public transport. Looking ahead, the one thing that we can say with certainty is that societies will change. They always have after major disease outbreaks, whether this was the Black Death in Europe in the 14th century, which contributed to a series of peasants revolts and the reformation, or the influenza pandemic in 1918, which contributed to increasing support for Social Security. We've explored these issues in a paper in Nature Medicine. Its key message is that this crisis does provide an opportunity to tackle some of the long-standing problems that have faced our societies, however, it is up to us whether we seize this opportunity.

See Also

The future is not what it used to be: Thoughts on the shape of the next normal

<https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/leadership/the-future-is-not-what-it-used-to-be-thoughts-on-the-shape-of-the-next-normal#>

COVID-19: remaking the social contract

[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30983-1/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30983-1/fulltext)

Mitigating the wider health effects of covid-19 pandemic response

<https://www.bmj.com/content/369/bmj.m1557>

If the world fails to protect the economy, COVID-19 will damage health not just now but also in the future

<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41591-020-0863-y>