Let College Students Go To School

BY JIM PREVOR, PRESIDENT & EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have provided five COVID-19 pandemic planning scenarios. The first four represent the lower and upper bounds of disease severity and viral transmissibility, and the fifth scenario is the “best estimate, based on latest surveillance data and scientific knowledge.” As this piece is written, this is based on data received by the CDC prior to 4/29/2020.

The CDC created this to help in public health preparedness and planning. The data does not constitute a prediction and, certainly, these things are subject to change as more data comes in. Still, it is the most up-to-date assessment of the situation by the most knowledgeable people in the country, and the numbers are striking:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>Current Best Estimate</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Symptomatic Case Fatality Stratified by age in years</td>
<td>0-49: 0.0005, 50-64: 0.002, 65+: 0.013, Overall: 0.004</td>
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These large cohorts, defined by age, include people with cancer and diabetes, heart disease and other ailments. So a healthy person will have an even lower risk of dying than is represented here.

In addition, it is important to recognize that these numbers represent fatality rates for people who actually got the COVID-19 virus! An overwhelming majority of Americans have not gotten COVID-19, and among those who have, surely everyone has not always taken the optimal safety path. In other words, an individual who elected to self-quarantine or, put another way, an individual who prioritized not getting COVID-19 — and so ordered groceries online, avoided social contact, etc. — would have lower chances of getting the virus and thus of dying of the virus.

In the United Kingdom the government publishes weekly death rates by age group. Though they change each week, the basic format is similar. The deaths heavily fall among the elderly. The bar graph at right shows the number of deaths registered by age group for England and Wales.

Note that this is NOT showing the percentage of each age group that died; it shows the actual number of deaths. Since there are relatively few people over 90 years old, for example, the percentage of deaths in this age group is far higher than in any other age cohort. Although we don’t have good statistics, it is highly likely that most of the elderly also had some pre-existing health condition.

These numbers speak loudly as to how society needs to progress. For example, there is nothing in these numbers to support decisions of institutions, such as the California State University system, to declare that almost all classes must be online.

Remember that every decision has many impacts. It is unlikely that all these 18-to-22-year-old college students will live in isolation. So if the fear is that these young people will pass COVID-19 onto others, the data indicates it is better that they pass it onto other 18-22-year-olds. If they are living at home and pass it on to parents or grandparents, the odds of a fatality resulting are far higher than if they lived among 18-22-year-old students.

Indeed, rather than closing down, the data indicates that colleges and universities should be figuring out how to stay open! Don’t send the kids back home for Thanksgiving; let them celebrate at school. Intersession? Well, do an intersession class session and keep the students in the dorms and on campus.

There are reasonable accommodations colleges and universities can and should make for the pandemic in a situation such as this. More rigorous check-ups, frequent testing, restricting access to campus, allowing older faculty and staff to work remotely.

Within colleges and universities, however, the risk to students is so small — especially if the students have been vetted against pre-existing medical conditions — that the world is better off having them stay together, building friendships, learning, participating in the full range of activities — plays, sports, student government, etc.

As a society, we must do all we can to open opportunities for young people. As students, they are the future, and it is both wrong and unfair to demand they sacrifice their youth and opportunities.

The risk is so small, the accommodations that can be made so simple, that the righteous path is so very clear.

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